Libraries Bring Value to Our Communities

Sometimes the key to a vibrant, healthy community can lie right under our nose, hidden in plain sight, so to speak.

That’s the sense I got after researching and writing the article about public libraries that starts on page 12. For too long, libraries have been under-appreciated, often drawing less interest and attention than a new sports arena, shopping complex, office tower, or theater. But the good news is that this has begun to change, as more communities are recognizing the value that having a strong library brings.

Not only do libraries provide valuable services for residents of all ages, incomes, and ethnic backgrounds, but they can also inject a healthy dose of vitality into downtowns, main streets, and neighborhood centers.

In times of economic stress like we’re currently experiencing, libraries provide especially important services to those trying to find a job, or residents just looking for a place to read a book, listen to a CD, or go online, without racking up a bill.

But the most interesting thing I discovered is that libraries in cities big and small are becoming dynamic places, actively seeking to engage the community. Instead of simply providing a place to read or take out a book (as important as these services are), libraries are expanding their mission.

There’s one troublesome cloud over this bright picture. In almost every state (the most notable exception being Ohio), libraries receive close to no state financial assistance. Yet our states lavish support on many “economic development” projects, of sometimes questionable value.

Visit your public library, and help it become the hub of your community.

Please feel free to share a copy of our article with your local librarian.

Wayne M. Senville
Editor

Plan 2
Learn to Speak So People Will Listen
by Elaine Cogan
Planning commissioners can be of great service in speaking to community groups and organizations. Some tips to help you become a more effective speaker.

Plan 4
Are We There Yet?
by Jim Segedy and Lisa Hollingsworth-Segedy
Taking on the tasks identified in your community’s plan may be a little like riding in the back seat of a car for a road trip where you don’t know the landmarks. That’s where benchmarks and indicators show their value.

Plan 6
Circle the USA
PCJ Editor Wayne Senville is hitting the road to report on local planning and land use issues. Three reports from the first leg of his travels:

• how the adaptive reuse of an old factory is key to a Vermont town’s future.
• why a city in upstate New York has eliminated downtown parking requirements.
• a look at the connections between college and community in a small western Pennsylvania city.

Plan 10
Planetizen Update
The Editors of Planetizen highlight six books of special interest to citizen planners.

Plan 12
Libraries at the Heart of Our Communities
by Wayne Senville
There’s been a dramatic change in the mission of a growing number of libraries across the country. No longer just static repositories of books and reference materials, libraries are increasingly at the heart of our communities, providing a broad range of services and activities. They are also becoming important “economic engines” of downtowns and neighborhood districts.

Plan 19
The Nine Circles of Planning Commission Hell
by Ric Stephens
Planning commission hearings can sometimes bear an uncomfortable resemblance to the descriptions in Dante’s epic poem. But there are ways to escape, explains PCJ columnist Ric Stephens.
Libraries at the Heart of Our Communities

by Wayne Senville

Is there a place in your community:
• where residents of all ages and incomes visit and enjoy spending their time?
• where people go to hear interesting speakers discuss new ideas, books, travel, and a broad range of topics?
• where comprehensive databases are available free of charge?
• where you can get help when applying for a job?
• where you can stop by and take home a book, CD, or DVD at virtually no cost?

That’s also a place:
• that’s “owned” by everyone in the community?
• and can be counted on, day after day, to draw people downtown or to main street?

In a growing number of cities and towns, there’s one answer to all these questions: the public library.

ANCHORS FOR OUR CITIES & TOWNS

Dramatic new or renovated libraries have become cornerstones of downtown in dozens of cities, including Denver, San Antonio, Des Moines, Indianapolis, and Salt Lake City, to name a few.

Noted architect and writer Witold Rybczynski offers an online slide show titled, “How do you build a public library in the age of Google?” His main point: libraries are far from dead in today’s Internet age – in fact, they’re making a comeback as key anchors in our downtowns. Indeed, they’re bringing us full circle to the “end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, when cities such as Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, and Chicago built ambitious public libraries.”

It’s important to recognize, however, that it’s not just big cities that benefit from libraries. In fact, smaller cities and towns may have even more to gain from having a thriving library as they don’t have the range of community gathering places that larger cities often have.

Reporter Annie Stamper writes that: “No more just a place to find books, today’s library is a place that extends far beyond its physical walls with the addition of digital information and access. Particularly in small towns, the library is often the hub of the community, providing a place for residents to meet, as well as to learn.”

Libraries, like city halls and post offices, are key to strong communities. Ed McMahon, a senior fellow at the Urban Land Institute, has pointed out that “public buildings and spaces create identity and a sense of place. They give communities something to remember and admire. The challenge facing public architecture is to provide every generation with structures that link them with their past, fill them with pride, and reinforce their sense of belonging.”

Keeping libraries in the center of town, and having them reflect high standards of design, is a challenge a growing number of communities are successfully meeting.

Hudson’s Star Attraction

I stopped in Hudson, Ohio, this April as part of my “Circle The USA” trip to learn about their library. Hudson is a small city (population 22,439), midway between Cleveland and Akron. It has elements of both a suburb and a small town. In the center of Hudson is its historic Main Street business district, home to the city’s library.

Opened in 2005, the library is housed in a stately brick building, with functional but very attractively-designed interior spaces. The focal point of the library is its rotunda, proof that the design of libraries today can match that of the classic Carnegie library buildings of a century ago.

New libraries tend to need considerably more space than their earlier counterparts. That’s the case in Hudson, where the new library building (at 50,000 square feet) is much bigger than...
the old building (at 17,000 square feet).

At first blush, this seems counter-intuitive. Why in today’s Internet and digital age would libraries need to be larger? More importantly, why do they seem in even greater demand?

I asked Assistant Director Margie Smith what draws people to the Hudson library. “It’s become the cultural, entertainment, and social hub of Hudson,” she replied. “The library programs a lot of readings, there are musical performances every week, and we also have meeting rooms.”

The library also provides over 50 public computer terminals, access to state and local databases, and a collection of more than 7,000 DVDs. There’s also a coffee shop to hang out in, and an outdoor patio. You can even borrow laptops from the library, and use them anywhere in the building or on the patio. What’s more, the Hudson library doesn’t close till 9 pm, Monday through Thursday, and is open a total of 69 hours each week, making it even more accessible.

For planners, however, I want to touch on what may be the most interesting aspect of the Hudson library: its location. It is part of an expansion of Hudson’s Main Street district.

Indeed, you could say the library is Main Street’s star attraction. As Hudson City Planner Mark Richardson told me, “you can’t just rely on retail in downtown expansion, you need an activity center like a library.” “The library,” Richardson continued, “fulfills its role as the anchor by creating opportunities for multi-stop trips downtown.”

The Main Street extension (called First & Main) consists of a mix of retail, office, and housing. The City has architectural design standards for the area. As Richardson notes, “the idea was for it to be a natural extension, not a replication, of Main Street.” The streets are laid out in a grid, connecting with the old village.

From Richardson’s perspective as a planner, having the library downtown is also cost-effective. As he explains, “the library’s location downtown has helped facilitate numerous partnerships and collaborations with the merchants; the public, private, and parochial schools; and the City of Hudson because they are all located in close proximity … these collaborations have allowed the library to stretch its tax dollars and, at the same time, more effectively serve the needs of Hudson.”

**The Economic Benefits of Libraries**

As is the case in Hudson, libraries can bring substantial benefits to downtowns and main street districts. Planning consultant Robert Gibbs has observed that “a typical public library draws 500 to 1,500 people a day, that’s close to the draw of a small department store.” Public buildings like libraries, he notes, “add to the authenticity of a town … they make...”

continued on page 14
Libraries

continued from page 13

it less of a shopping center and more of a town center.  

Seattle is another city that has gained substantial economic benefits from its new downtown library, opened in 2004. An economic assessment prepared for the City found that “the Library is associated with $16 million in net new spending in Seattle in its first year of operations – equal to $80 million for 5 years,” and that “nearby businesses report increases in spending associated with Library visitors.” As a result, “the increased number of Library visitors contributes to Downtown vitality and vibrancy, making Downtown a more attractive residential and commercial market.”

As Brian Murphy of the Seattle-based Berk & Associates, which prepared the economic assessment, told me, “the library has become an important part of a network of attractions in Seattle.” In part, this is because of the library’s dramatic design. Its location close to downtown residential neighborhoods and the city’s retail core is also a big plus, he added.

Perhaps more surprising is another major draw that Murphy pointed to, the Seattle library’s extensive genealogical resources, which attract visitors from a wide area. Indeed, the library has more than 40,000 items in its collection, and three full-time genealogy reference librarians to provide assistance.

“A Harbor You Can Sail Into”

Those are the words that Stephen Coronella used to describe the role of the Putney, Vermont, public library. For Coronella, who’s the librarian in this small Vermont town (population 2,600), a good library works a lot like a harbor. It provides a place where people can dock themselves for a while, socialize with others, and feel some comfort and security.

When I met with Coronella, he explained that over the years libraries have become more multi-faceted. They’re no longer just places to read and take out books (though that’s still a key function). Increasingly, libraries are providing a broader range of services, from access to research databases, to loaning videos and CDs, to providing Internet access, to offering space for lectures and public meetings.

The Putney library attracts one hundred or more people on a daily basis, and forty or fifty more often show up for evening programs. You’ll find people of all ages, incomes, and backgrounds using the Putney library. Its seven public access computers are very popular, and offer a valuable service in this rural community where residential broadband service is limited.

The library’s beautiful new building is located within walking distance of the town center (less than half-a-mile away) and next to a co-op market and senior housing. The new building was made possible in part from a generous donor, but also through extensive fund-raising in the Putney community.

The importance of libraries like Putney’s to village and town centers was underscored in a public forum sponsored by the Windham Regional Commission (the WRC’s service area includes Putney, Brattleboro, and 25 other small towns in southeastern Vermont). As Kendall Gifford, a planner with the WRC, told me, it “opened up perceptions of what libraries have to offer.”

One by-product of the forum was the formation of a task force to develop recommendations for strengthening local libraries within the region. The task force’s report, The New Heart of the Old Village Center: The Role of the Library in Community Development, includes a series of recommendations centered on three goals: to achieve universal access to library services; to assure adequate funding for libraries; and to use libraries to strengthen village centers.

Susan McMahon, another planner with the WRC, has been struck by how often people have mentioned the value of their libraries “as community places, where you can see your neighbors,” and by the importance that seniors, in particular, place on having a library nearby.

One problem facing local libraries in Vermont – and many other states – is the
lack of state financial support. This puts the burden on cities and towns to provide funding from their municipal budget. Not surprisingly, this can be a major hurdle, especially in communities with limited resources. 

While private organizations like the Freeman Foundation (in Vermont) and the Gates Foundation (nationwide) have stepped up to provide financial support, this is not a long-term solution. Recognizing this, the Windham Regional Commission task force report points out the importance of educating legislators, community leaders, and residents about libraries' funding needs “in the context of all the positive community and economic benefits” they bring.

From a national perspective, why shouldn’t libraries be more highly valued? In 2006, the most recent year for which data is available, there were some 1.4 billion visits to the nation’s 9,208 public libraries.

To put library visits in perspective, consider that in 2007 the attendance at major league baseball games was 81 million and NFL football, 22 million – add in NCAA men’s and women’s basketball (43 million) and football (49 million) and the total is less than 15 percent the number of visits to public libraries. Yet libraries may well be the single most important civic institution in America today. As scholar Vartan Gregorian has noted, “Across America we are coming to realize the library’s unsurpassed importance as a civic institution … In our democratic society, the library stands for hope, for learning, for progress, for literacy, for self-improvement and for civic engagement. The library is a symbol of opportunity, citizenship, equality, freedom of speech and freedom of thought, and hence, is a symbol for democracy itself. It is a critical component in the free exchange of information, which is at the heart of our democracy.”

The Hub of Moab
Twenty-two hundred miles west of Putney, Vermont, is the small city of Moab, Utah. Their new library, opened in 2006, is just two blocks off Main Street in the heart of the city’s compact downtown.

continued on page 16
**Internet Access**

One of the essentials of being informed today is having Internet access. That's still a problem in many rural areas, and for low-income households. Public libraries are a critically important resource in terms of broadening the availability of this access.

A nationwide survey conducted last year by the Florida State University's Information Institute focused on the Internet and libraries. Two of the most striking findings: 72.5 percent of libraries reported that they are the only provider of free public computer and Internet access in their community, while 98.9 percent of public libraries indicated that they offer Internet access.* Moreover, according to the Institute of Museum & Library Service, in 2006 a total of 196,000 Internet computers were available in America's public libraries (3.4 per 5,000 people).**

Another sign of the times: the rapid increase in the number of libraries offering wireless access—a tenfold increase from 1996 to 2006.*** Wireless access is of value not just to residents, but to tourists and business travelers when they visit a community.

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* Public Libraries and the Internet 2008: Study Results and Findings.
*** Id. Public Libraries and the Internet …

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**Libraries**

continued from page 15

Moab is located in a remote, but spectacularly beautiful, corner of Utah, and is home to Arches National Park, a thriving recreational industry, and residents who love the outdoors.* But it is also home to a fine new county library, at 15,000 square feet, triple the size of its former location.

The library itself is a delightful place. When I stepped inside, it was a beehive of activity, with people of all ages engaged in reading and, yes, in using the Internet.

In fact, Internet use has been booming. When I followed up with Library Director Carrie Valdes this May, she told me that the number of online sessions last year exceeded 93,000, up from 75,000 in 2007. The library building is also wireless. In part, the growth in Internet use owes to the fact that anything faster than dial-up service is very costly in Moab. Valdes also believes that the economic downturn has led to increased use, especially as more people are looking to access online job search services.

The Grand County library is part of a small complex of public buildings, making it even more convenient for area residents. Right next door are the municipal offices, in a recently rehabbed former elementary school building.

The Library Board saw the need to purchase the property the library is now located on several years ago. It wanted to “lock in” a downtown site for use when the time came for expansion (important since there are few large parcels available close to downtown). Valdes believes that keeping the library downtown was critically important. As she put it, “everything that happens in Moab, happens downtown.”

Owing to its welcoming environment, expanded size (allowing for the addition of a dedicated children’s room), and the state of the economy, library use has surged— from an annual average of about 90,000 visits before the new building opened to 150,000 last year. It has become, says Valdes, “a true community center.”

**Libraries Mix It Up**

“Among private sector developers of malls, commercial corridors, mixed-use developments and joint-use facilities, libraries are gaining recognition for other qualities—their ability to attract tremendous foot traffic, provide long-term tenancy, and complement neighboring retail and cultural destinations.” That’s from a recent report, Making Cities Stronger: Public Library Contributions to Local Economic Development, prepared by the Urban Library Council.**

As the report continues, “Library buildings are versatile. They fit in a wide mix of public and private sector developments. Library leaders and private developers across the country are beginning to notice distinct advantages to incorporating public libraries into mixed use, retail and residential areas.”

You can now find libraries not just in malls, but as part of residential developments, and other mixed-use projects.

In the Chicago suburb of Des Plaines, the new library—which opened in August 2000—is located next to a stop on one of the METRA commuter rail lines. It is the central element of...
a 6.2-acre redevelopment that also includes 30,000 square feet of retail, a 180-unit condominium, and a parking garage. This mix of complementary uses has created a hub of activity in the heart of this suburban city of 58,000.11

In putting together the project, the library served as the traffic anchor, “much like a large retailer would” explained Stephen Friedman of S.B. Friedman & Co. His firm, which specializes in advising communities on public/private partnerships, worked with the City of Des Plaines on the redevelopment. Having a high quality library, Friedman adds, is also an important part of being a “full service” community, something that suburbs are increasingly focusing on as they seek to create a high quality of life for residents.

Another interesting point that Friedman makes is the importance of libraries in middle-income communities like Des Plaines. “People can’t always afford Barnes & Noble or Borders,” he notes, but many middle-income individuals are highly educated, “so the library becomes a critical public service for them.”

In St. Paul, Minnesota, the 31,000-square foot Rondo Community Outreach library is on the ground floor of a new building that includes three floors of mixed-income housing, plus a floor of parking immediately above the library (serving the apartments) and underground parking below (for library patrons).

The project grew out of a desire by the City and neighborhood to redevelop what had been the site of an adult entertainment theater – a focal point of community anger – demolished after the City acquired the property. The idea of a mixed-use building emerged from a conjunction of interests: the City’s goal of providing more affordable housing and the fact that the existing neighborhood public library had outgrown its building.12

According to Alice Neve, Supervisor of the Rondo Area Libraries, having the library in the same building as the housing provided some significant economies of scale, allowing for more space than if the library had been built as a standalone building. Families living in the apartments above, Neve notes, are also (not surprisingly) frequent visitors to the library.

A HOME FOR ALL OF THE COMMUNITY

Libraries provide something increasingly scarce in our cities and towns, what Brattleboro, Vermont, library director Jerry Carbone described to me as “neutral public space.”

Carbone explained that Brattleboro’s Brooks Memorial Library, in the heart of downtown, makes its community room available at no charge to local organizations three evenings every week. The fact that it is public space, Carbone notes, makes it a more comfortable meeting place for some than a church basement or a business office meeting room – even though these private spaces are typically made available for community meetings in a spirit of good will.

This message was reinforced in a conversation I had with David Lankes, Director of the Information Institute at Syracuse University. As Lankes observed, libraries are in a pivotal role because “there are very few civic organizations left today” that can provide a space accessible to everyone in the community.

But for Lankes, the role of today’s library goes beyond providing community space. Libraries, he argues, should also be actively seeking ways of “enriching and enhancing” issues people are most interested in.

To cite one example, Lankes told me how in several cities, librarians have developed training sessions – open to all – covering the basics of setting up a new business, and putting together a business plan. Along the same lines, some libraries are teaming up with local community development agencies to provide job counseling centers. This level of

11 The City of Des Plaines even offers a video tour of the library, accessible from their home page: www.desplaines.org/.
12 For more on the Rondo library: www.stpaul.lib.mn.us/locations/rondo_about.html.

continued on page 18
Seniors now flood the libraries for many reasons including taking computer classes and attending special programs. Young people find willing, friendly help at the library ... and yes, though, the library wasn’t designed to be a hygiene center or daytime shelter, some homeless people find the library the most welcoming place to spend their days.”

There’s been a “sea change” in the past five to ten years in the role libraries are playing in communities, says Sari Feldman, Director of the Cuyahoga County, Ohio, Library, which operates 28 branches in Cleveland’s suburbs. Feldman, who is also President-elect of the Public Library Association, told me that “libraries have become vibrant centers of community interaction,” with librarians working more closely with community groups and businesses. In Cuyahoga County, notes Feldman, “the library does extensive focus groups, polling, and market research” to better learn what the community wants.

Libraries have been especially proving their worth during the current recession. As Feldman explains, “we’re clearly the place where people are coming for job information, for preparing online job applications, and for basic financial literacy ... and we provide them support in doing this.”

**SUMMING UP:**

The 21st century library has arrived. Its mission goes far beyond loaning out books and providing reference materials. In fact, in a growing number of cities and towns, the library has become the hub of the community, drawing large numbers of new users. This is happening because libraries are providing programs, meeting space, computer access, and resources that are responding to a broader array of community needs.

Moreover, when libraries are located in downtown, village, or neighborhood centers, there’s also a special synergy at work. Libraries generate increased business for local merchants, while those shopping or working downtown visit the library as part of their day.

Libraries and community. They’re really inseparable.

Wayne Senville is Editor of the Planning Commissioners Journal. His previous articles and reports for the PCJ include “Downtown Futures” (PCJ #69, Winter 2008); “Crossing America” (PCJ #68, Fall 2007); “Bright Ideas” (PCJ #61, Winter 2006); and “Preservation Takes Center Stage” (PCJ #52, Fall 2003).

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13 To learn about other creative ways in which libraries can engage with their community, see the Project for Public Spaces “Libraries That Matter,” at: www.pps.org/info/newsletter/april2007/libraries_that_matter; and Making Cities Stronger: Public Library Contributions to Local Economic Development (cited in footnote 10).


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