

Rethinking Space and Furniture Design
FOR THE FUTURE OF LIBRARIES



T H O N E T[®]

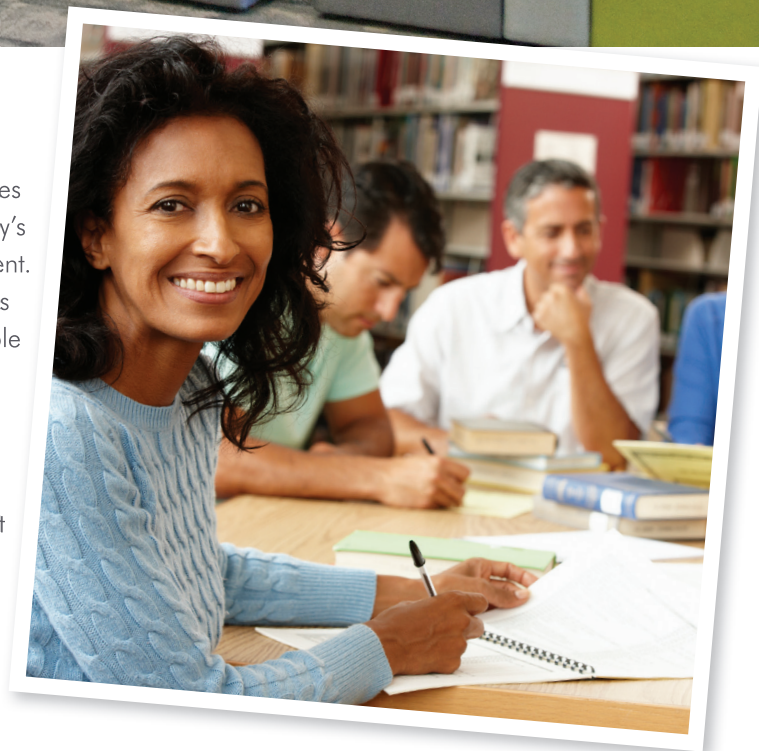
The digital age has caused libraries to undergo significant changes to better address the needs and challenges of their communities. Once a repository of books and other written materials, libraries increasingly serve a variety of purposes and offer more resources than ever before. Today's libraries serve as a hub for multi-generational learning and collaboration, address community challenges such as the need for greater access to technology, and provide an environment for social engagement.



Contrary to the predictions of eventual obsolescence, libraries are adapting to meet the changing needs of their patrons and ensure long-term sustainability. Beyond offering traditional resources, libraries strive for a user-focused, service-rich environment that supports today's social and educational patterns of learning, teaching and engagement. Technology plays a pivotal role in this transformation. In fact, libraries are using technology as a catalyst for change, while rethinking the role of the physical library through new approaches to space design.

The digital age impacts libraries beyond simply offering new technologies to patrons. Library staff continue to research new ways to foster a sense of community and encourage collaboration, without increasing their budget.

"The books are still there," says Jack Hedge, FAIA, LEED AP BD+C, a principal with Columbus-based Design Group, "but they've become community centers offering lots of other things, too."



As a community resource, libraries now offer additional types of practical information to draw more people to the library – information about health, education, business, child care, technology, the environment, finding a new job, learning new skills and much more. Through the development of technology-friendly spaces or “makerspaces,” rooms reconfigured to encourage creativity and collaboration, people are now using these areas to gather, create, invent and learn. Along with these new areas, libraries are even renting meeting and conference rooms to local businesses, organizations and groups that might not have access to the same types of technology in their facilities.

Just as technology has transformed libraries, it has greatly impacted space design and the furnishings that fills those areas. **As library staff reimagine what their library can offer, they are evaluating their building to determine how areas can be used in multiple ways.**

“Librarians have to rethink their spaces on a daily basis,” explains Kimberly Bolan Cullin, MLIS, president and principal consultant of Kimberly Bolan & Associates, LLC. Specializing in service planning and facility design for small and medium-sized libraries, Cullin recognizes the need for modern furniture,

stating, “Furniture that can easily be reconfigured helps keep library spaces up-to-date and relevant with limited budgets” and more importantly, offers a better patron experience.

Multipurpose furniture allows more people, businesses and organizations to utilize the same library spaces, tailoring the room layout to meet the needs of each category of user. In addition to its role in the reconfiguring of spaces within the library, furniture plays a key role in helping to modernize a library’s culture.

There are 4 key factors that have impacted furniture in the changing library environment: flexibility, durability, comfort and attractiveness.

Cullin’s research supports the need for change, stating, “Many non-library users I interview say they would use their libraries more if ... the furniture was more comfortable and attractive.”



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— Kimberly Bolan Cullin, MLIS, President and Principal Consultant of Kimberly Bolan & Associates, LLC

1 | FLEXIBILITY

Technology has enabled a perpetual connection to others and impacted how we engage and even how we learn. As a result, library furniture has to be flexible to accommodate these trends toward greater engagement and collaboration, whether in-person or via electronic devices. **Characteristics to look for in flexible furniture include:**

- Small, lightweight tables that patrons of all ages can move together to accommodate group conversations and activities
- The addition of casters to task chairs to make it easier to move within a room
- Folding tables and stacking chairs that can be easily stored when not in use
- Small-scale lounge seating that can be reconfigured, relocated or taken apart
- Small ottomans and stools that can be grouped together when not in use, minimizing the amount of space occupied in the area

Additional elements that successfully contribute to a flexible environment include demountable wall systems for privacy within a larger area and whiteboards for visual learning and collaborative work.

“Demountable walls create lovely, intimate spaces that aren’t super permanent,” says Cullin. “They also allow librarians to add new functionality to older buildings beyond moveable tables and chairs.”

Safety is also important when discussing flexibility. Furniture should be easily managed, lightweight in nature and free of sharp edges





2 | DURABILITY

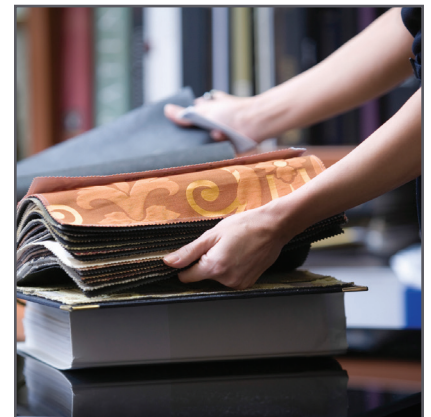
For durable, quality furniture, commercial grade is most ideal. With raw components proven to last, commercial grade furniture has endured extensive training to withstand the high-use, mobile environment of the library. Investing in durable furniture will prolong its lifespan, reduce costs otherwise related to repairs or replacements, and won't interfere with the patron experience.

Cullin comments, "When it comes to moving parts, less is better. Moving parts can break and then you get into repair issues."

When choosing well-made furniture, decisions should be based on where and how it will be used. For example, tables in children's areas are often moved to accommodate library programs or projects, cleaned frequently and receive extreme wear and tear. In these instances, laminated table tops with a vinyl or urethane edge will resist impact and clean easily. Solid wood tops are also used, but do require more maintenance.

Durable seating is important to consider and should be chosen with the term "active space" in mind, due to its heavy usage at the library. According to Tiffany Nash, a partner with Chicago-based Product Architecture + Design, the fabric chosen should be as durable as possible. Polyester or vinyl fabric is easy to clean and stain blockers can be ordered on fabric to prolong the life of the chairs.

As libraries rebrand themselves as the resource center of the community, it is important to recognize the large amount of activity taking place within its doors. This relates to fabric selection and the **Wyzenbeek abrasion rating** – the fabric's ability to withstand surface rubbing—and should be considered. The industry standard is 30,000 double rubs, with higher numbers ensuring better performance.



When looking at fabric, ask about its Wyzenbeek abrasion rating, which is a fabric's ability to withstand surface rubbing; the minimum industry standard is 30,000 double rubs. Higher numbers suggest better performance.

3 | COMFORT

When it comes to comfort, Cullin indicates that it's the top consideration she hears in her focus groups. **Patrons and library staff alike want comfortable furniture conducive to using the library.**

"Library boards envision stately-looking interiors, with green desk lamps on traditional hardwood tables, that seat four in matching hardwood chairs," she observes. "But maybe three out of 100 patrons want this. They are tired of uncomfortable furniture that does not lend itself to wanting to spend extended periods of time at the library."

Another factor regarding comfort is ergonomics. Richard Waters, MLS, a principal consultant with Dallas-based Godfrey's Associates, Inc., notes, "a chair has the potential to be used by young and old, short and tall, large and small, and all those users must be taken into account."

Ergonomic desk chairs offer many moving parts that adjust the way the chair fits to the patron. These types of chairs have the appropriate pitch, dimensions and padding required for a moderate amount of work.

Technology also impacts comfort. Patrons are often using electronic devices at the library and offering furniture with the ability to plug in these devices has become much more relevant and at times, expected.



"Anywhere we can put power in furniture, we do, including children's and teen spaces," says Nash.

Technology continues to change and keeping up with the latest trends is not an easy or inexpensive task for library staff to follow. Fortunately, library furniture has kept up with these changes, contributing to the excitement.

"Libraries are exciting places right now," Hedge concludes. "People still go there to read and borrow materials, but they're not quiet places anymore. They are places people come together, learn and collaborate. They have become lifelong learning centers, and that is pretty exciting."

Libraries will continue to evolve in the years ahead. The better a resource a library is to its community—by continuously adding more activities, events, services, technology, and other offerings—the more activity the library will see. New thinking about how space is designed and utilized is one important way to help ensure that the library remains a relevant, sustainable and vital part of the fabric of a greater community—an essential objective of libraries nationwide. ■





4 | ATTRACTIVE

An attractive space, outfitted with stylish furniture, more easily draws people to a room.

“I can’t tell you how many times patrons refer to Starbucks and other coffee shops to describe the look and feel they prefer,” says Cullin, who advocates for a transitional look that falls between traditional and modern and can be achieved with finishes, materials, fabrics, and neutral colors that are timeless. Furniture that combines curves with straight lines offer a simplistic design, while fabrics can allow for interesting textures.



Standing-height tables and stools for meetings, conversation or to easily scan the room due to an elevated position

To help create a visually-stimulating library environment, consider:

- Booths or benches around the perimeter to create a place to sit, read or observe, or double as storage cabinets with seats that lift
- Standing-height tables and stools for meetings, conversation or to easily scan the room due to an elevated position
- Collaborative rooms with different seating options, such as meeting tables or lounge furniture, and that incorporate technology, such as video monitors and conference telephones
- Quiet rooms with a variety of furniture for patrons who require absolute silence, such as smaller tables or lounge seating, similar to a living room

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