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Redesigning the interior of an existing public library to inspire use

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Meeting:	**133. Library Buildings and Equipment**

Abstract

After providing a brief background to the project, the paper describes how two public library users applied library design guidelines and interior design principles to propose the redesign of a public branch library in South Africa. The following user requirements are discussed and illustrated with photos and three-dimensional drawings: a library interior that promotes and facilitates access, that is functional and modern, aesthetically pleasing, and that creates experiences that users can enjoy. The premise of the paper is that interior design needs and requirements of public library users in many parts of the world do not differ much and that other libraries can therefore apply or adapt the theory, ideas and examples given in this paper to suit their own circumstances.

1.   Introduction

When a public branch library in South Africa had to make way for a new office development in 2009, the developers erected a new library building but paid little attention to the interior. The library had to reuse most of its old furniture and equipment in a space smaller, and to some extent less efficient, than before. The library staff was given little opportunity to participate in the interior planning of the library.

Being public library users, the authors of this paper observed that the interior design of the new library fell short in many ways: it was aesthetically not very pleasing, not very functional and it was uninspiring to use.

With the permission of the City Council we proposed a redesign of the library's interior with the emphasis on using space, lighting, and colour to improve functionality and use. More specifically, from a user point of view our aim was to propose a library interior with the following characteristics:

a. The interior must promote and facilitate access. It must be inviting and allow users to find their way with ease, and have easy access to whatever the library provides – whether it is in-house or online.
b. Equipment, furniture and layout must be functional and fit for a modern library in a high-tech age.
c. The interior must be aesthetically pleasing and comply with the basic principles of interior design.
d. The interior must create experiences like memories, ideas and emotions that users enjoy and want to come back for.

Listeners will observe that our list of requirements is very similar to the needs and requirements that library users have expressed in user surveys worldwide. As a matter of fact, all of the above have been documented in one way or another in IFLA's Library Building Guidelines (Latimer & Niegaard 2007).

Although this paper deals with one particular public library in South Africa, the circumstances and challenges that call for a redesign of this library, also applies to many other public libraries in South Africa and elsewhere. Many of those libraries have wonderful products and services and have the potential to add tremendous value to their communities. But so often their products and services are invisible to their communities due to the absence of initiatives and means to promote and communicate their value. Buildings and their interiors are very effective means of doing exactly that. Therefore, this paper is not only about redesigning one public library in South Africa; it is also about the need to redesign many of our existing libraries in South Africa and in other parts of the world.

2.   Method

We thoroughly observed the layout, functionality and interior of the existing library. We then used library design guidelines (Gill 2001; Latimer & Niegaard 2007) and interior design theory (Gilliatt 2001; Nissen & Faulkner 1994) to propose an interior that will meet user needs and requirements. We also relied on the knowledge and skills gained from our respective backgrounds as a university librarian and a student of interior design and visual merchandising. Furthermore, library staff and users were asked to comment on draft designs.

3.   Profile of the Alkantrant Public library

The Alkantrant library - the name means "mountain ridge on both sides" - is situated in a residential suburb of Pretoria where most of the residents fall in the middle to upper socio economic bracket. The library has approximately 5 000 users of which 24% users are senior citizens, 42% are adults, 7% teenagers and 27% children. It has a total collection of 73 500 items of which books make up almost 95%.

4.   Interior design challenges and opportunities

From an interior design point of view we were faced with several challenges:
•   The building has an asymmetrical shape (Figure 1).
•   The book area is already filled to capacity with little space to create variations (Figure 2).
•   The lower ground area of the library is in essence a basement with a low ceiling, hard textures and a column in the centre of the area (Figure 3).
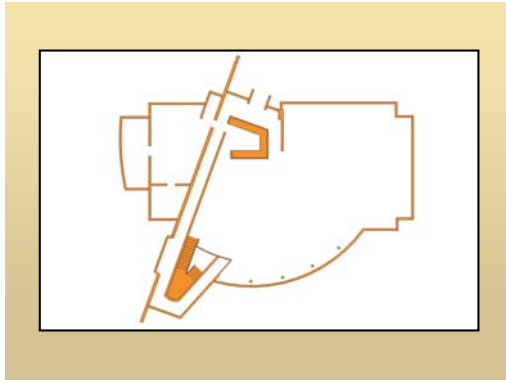
Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

- Existing systems also prohibited drastic changes. One cannot merely propose changes in the layout that will affect, for instance, the classification order of collections, since it will have an impact on existing retrieval systems.

The current library building, however, also provided some interior design opportunities**:** the structure and finishing of the building are brand new; it has an inspiring exterior (Figure 4) and it has abundant natural light on ground level.

Although we categorised our presentation under specific topics the content is not one-dimensional. Functionality, accessibility, and aesthetical requirements are often intertwined and inter-dependable.

5.   Promote and facilitate access

Our first requirement is that the interior must promote and facilitate access**.** From the moment that a user enters the library, the layout, signage, and even the furniture and equipment must be such that users get access to whatever the library offers with ease and satisfaction. This starts with first impressions.

5.1   First impressions

Just as the entrance hall of a house welcomes and sets the tone for the rooms beyond, the lobby or entrance hall of a library creates an instant impression for anyone who enters. It must be designed and maintained to reflect the character and nature of the library; and what users can expect once inside the library. First impressions of a

library may ultimately determine whether borrowers come back to the library in the long term (Barlow & Morris 2007, p.2).

Currently the first impression when entering the Alkantrant library is that of a barricade. A brick and mortar circulation desk awaits library users only two meters from the main entrance, blocking the natural flow of people either entering or exiting the library (Figure 5).
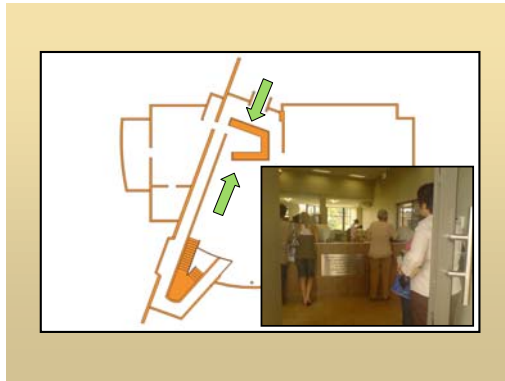

Figure 5

Our redesign entails the opening up of the entrance hall by breaking down the existing circulation desk to allow a free flow in and out of the library; but more importantly, to lure people inside to explore the rest of the library (figure 6).

The wall to the left of the entrance will be converted into an information wall, but not cluttered with leaflets and handwritten notes. Instead, we would like to see a big plasma screen providing essential information such as library services, events and activities, how the collection is organized, layout of the library, announcements of new books, etc.

Figure 6

Figure 7

As library users we would also like to see freestanding Internet workstations much closer to the entrance of the library. Not only will it be functional but also will it immediately focus attention on access, usability and service.

5.2 Layout

To inspire use from a user perspective we would move the circulation desk more to the centre of the library where it will be closer to the collection and to the reference section (Figure 8). It will ensure that service take priority over supervision and control.

Figure 8

Figure 9

We do not consider libraries as shops or retail stores. They are fundamentally different. But we acknowledge that elements of retail design and marketing can be used to the advantage of libraries by focusing on the best that libraries can offer. In retail stores, for instance, the area around cash registers often contains numerous displays to attract impulsive buyers. We propose book display stands close to the circulation desk to promote books on current topics, or staff recommendations. Book displays should also be located along major paths of traffic (Figure 9). Seating should be placed strategically throughout the library to give users the opportunity to leaf through books while relaxing, so that they will remain in the library longer.

One of the prominent architectural features of the library is the big, curved-space, floor-to-ceiling windows on one side of the building. The library should make best use of this feature to create an informal reading area in a comfortable lounge style, next to the windows (Figure 10). We would open up the area by creating a different shelf layout (Figures 11 and 12). The new shelf layout will also provide better access to the collection and allow more natural light between shelves. It will also create a sense of balance, which is an important principle of interior design.
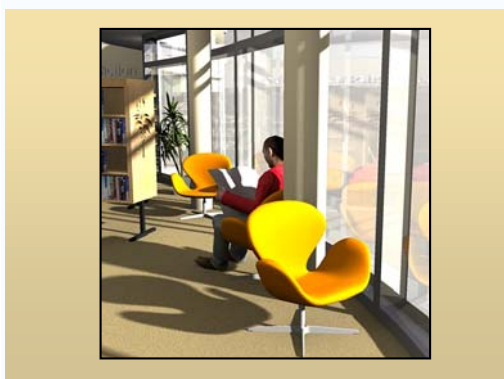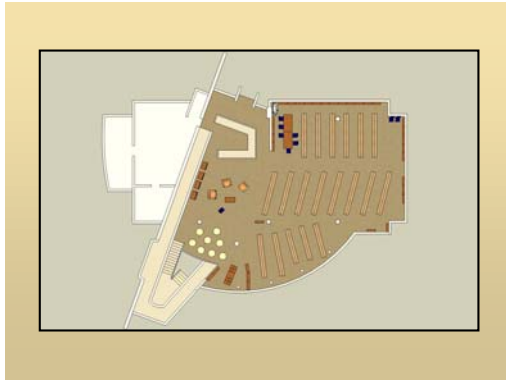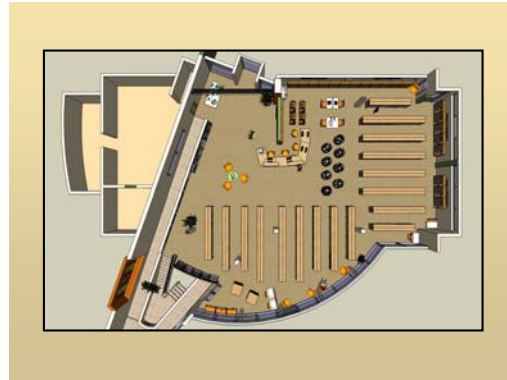

Figure 10

| Figure 11 | Figure 12 |

5.3 Wayfinding

Effective signage can contribute much to improve access and usability. Instead of having to find a place for every message, we propose that the library focuses on a handful of messages that matter (Figures 13). The watchword must be simplicity. Signs that convey too much information are certain to confuse customers and are self-defeating (Fitch and Knobel 1990).

Figure 13

6. Functional interior

Our second requirement is functionality. A public library must function well as a place to read, browse, access information, and to participate in cultural and social activities. We, as users, would therefore like to see that the furniture, equipment, lighting, colour schemes, in fact everything contribute to achieve such functionalities. For instance, provide comfortable and ergonomically styled chairs; not only for informal seating but also for reference and study areas; and not only for adults but also for teens and children. Beanbags, ottoman chairs and bar stools can have a place in a library but nothing beats a stylish but comfortable chair when you have to spend some time reading, studying or relaxing.

The Alkantrant library currently has very little suitable seating. To inspire use we would create more and a wider variety of seating in the library. Our proposed design will include a space that promotes group interaction and discussion; individual carrels with low separation sides (Figure 14), chairs with tables and chairs without tables, tables with computers and tables without computers, stand-up workstations and

sit-down workstations.

Figure 14

7.   Good-looking interior

Our third requirement for a public library to inspire use is that the interior must be aesthetically pleasing and comply with the basic principles of interior design, which are unity and harmony, emphasis, balance, repetition, proportion and scale.

7.1 Unity and harmony

An important consideration was to create unity and harmony with the design. It is therefore appropriate that a common style and theme run throughout. This can be accomplished in the following ways:

a. With well considered use of colour. We propose two to three colours, using them in varying shades throughout the library (Figures 15).
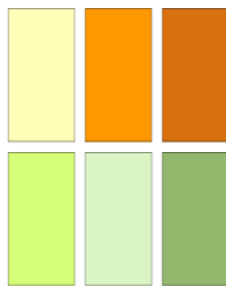

Figure 15

b. We would use the aloe plants outside the main entrance of the library as theme and apply the image of the aloe, for instance, to the side panels of bookshelves (Figure 16) and the name and theme of the coffee shop in the basement (Figure 17).

Figure 16

Figure 17

c. We would repeat elements, balancing them throughout the library, and then add a little variety so that the library has its own identity.

7.2 Emphasis / Focal points

A library should also have focal points. The purpose of focal points is to draw attention and to encourage library users to explore further. Focal points are therefore also means of inspiring use. However, focal points must be an integral part of the decoration, linked through scale, style, colour or theme.

Time permits us to discuss only two focal points:

a. Without doubt the children's section should be a focal point in any public library. An enchanting children's area will inspire use and contribute to life long readers. We would exploit the open field immediately outside the large windows of the children's section to create an image of a playground in nature (Figure 18). The colours of grass, leaves and tree trunks will also reinforce the overall colour scheme of the library.
b. Persuading or influencing users up and down stairs is a challenge to most libraries. We will take up this challenge by adding large bookmarks as murals next to the staircase as well as having an out of the ordinary light fixture above the staircase (Figure 19).
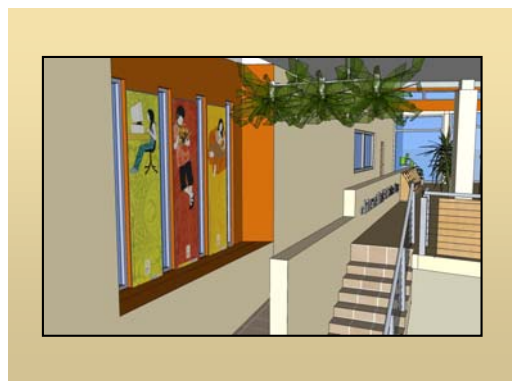

Figure 18

Figure 19

8.3   Balance

Another way of creating a pleasant-looking library is to apply the principle of balance. Balance refers to the arrangement of objects that create an even feel in a room. Simply, it means a state of equality. Balanced objects can be either symmetrical or asymmetrical.

Because of the asymmetrical shape of the library and the fact that shelves and furniture currently occupy almost all the space on the ground floor of the library it is very difficult to observe any elements of balance. The following changes to the existing interior can, however, create a sense of balance and thereby contribute to a more attractive and user-friendly library:

- By rearranging the layout of bookshelves. We already illustrated that in a previous slide (Figure 12).
- By using colour. Some colours have more weight than others (Figure 20).
- One can also create balance by placing the two reading areas - one formal and one informal - at opposite ends.
- Because of the asymmetrical shape, the library can also achieve balance by creating a seating arrangement that is somewhat formal.

Figure 20

8.4   Repetition

Repetition or rhythm refers to the recurrence of elements such as colors, lines and shapes within a design and can also be used to keep interest or reduce randomness. We would create rhythm and repetition by:

a. Repeating certain colours, textures and shapes (Figure 21).
b. The recurrence of the aloe theme on the side panels of book shelves.
c. Using same size library week posters as mural decorative in the Internet café and coffee shop.
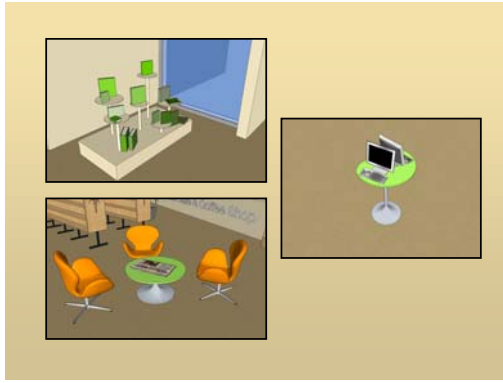
Figure 21

8.5   Proportions and Scale

"Size relationships in a room are defined by proportion and scale. Proportion refers to the ratio of one design element to another or one element to the whole. Scale relates to the size of an object when compared with the size of the space in which it is located" (Iven 2005).

In big spaces, like libraries, with many objects of different sizes and shapes, it is difficult to achieve proportion and scale. However, it is quite possible to achieve that in subsections of the library, for instance the children's section, where tables, chairs and shelves must be of the same scale and proportion.

9. Creating an experience

Public libraries should be places where people feel welcome and at home; places where users can discover and learn in a relaxed, comfortable and stylish environment. Although the redesign that we propose for the Alkantrant library will hopefully create positive experiences, we have not made special reference to that until now. We therefore would like to end this part of the presentation by suggesting how we would turn a cold and unfriendly basement area (Figure 3) into a lively and contemporary Internet café and coffee shop (Figure 22). We believe that such an area will extend and reinforce feelings of welcome, relaxation and a sense of community within a learning environment.
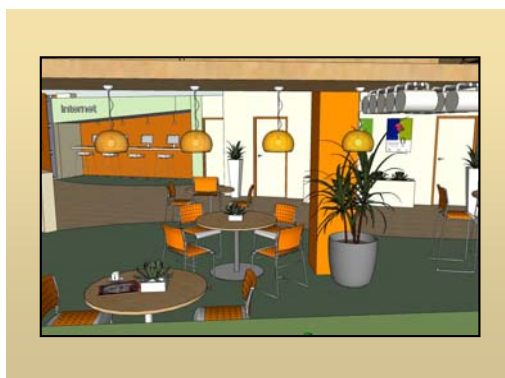

Figure 22

Conclusions

In conclusion, this proposal serves as an example of how members of the community can become actively involved in initiatives to improve a library's image, functionality and use. The authors may have had the benefit of having some library and interior design experience but we believe that if we had conducted a scientific survey in the Alkantrant library community, their needs and requirements would probably not differ much from ours. Furthermore, we believe that the interior design needs and requirements of public library users in other parts of the world are probably not much different. We therefore believe that other libraries can also apply or adapt the theory, ideas and examples that we have presented today to suit their own circumstances.

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Additional reading

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