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DECATUR PUBLIC LIBRARY
Decatur, Illinois

REPORT OF A STUDY OF THE
NEW LIBRARY BUILDING PROJECT
AT DECATUR

Revised June 24, 1965

by

Joseph L. Wheeler

Decatur Public Library, Decatur, Illinois - Talk given by
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The people of Decatur may take some satisfaction in their public library service situation, but not for the delay in meeting the actual need for a new building. This is a high potential library-use community, and its public library may justifiably be called "on the ball". Its circulation has increased from 437,000 in 1959, to 583,000 in 1964. Its registration is 30,500. This means that more than 30,000 Decatur citizens have individual borrowers cards, whereas the national standard calls for registration of only one third the population, which would be 27,600. (The standard registration period is three years, when re-registration is required.) This is evidence of a heavy public demand for library service in Decatur, considering the numerous "don't care", uneducated and underprivileged persons in a typical city. A check two years ago was rather remarkable in showing that in 54 per cent of Decatur families at least one person had a library borrower's card. Most significant is the record of 70,000 informational questions looked up in fiscal 1964, whereas the minimum standard is now $3/4$ reference question per capita, which would be $3/4$ of 83,000, or 62,250. Few libraries have reached the national maximum reference service standard of one informational question per capita, or even the $3/4$ question minimum standard.

I am not called upon to report on the administration and staffing of this library, but it is running under strong and devoted leadership with an able, dedicated and hardworking staff. The librarian, for example, is giving ten or twelve hours a week of extra unpaid time to meet rapidly increasing demands.

NEW BUILDING IS AN IMPERATIVE NEED

The community seems well aware that it badly needs a new library building. The present building, given by Andrew Carnegie in 1903 when the city had 25,500 population, has theoretically 22,200 square feet, or about half the formula requirement for the present population. But at least ten per cent of this space is killed by the heavy masonry exterior and interior walls, which cut up the space badly and make flexibility impossible. The main floor has much less than half the space needed to meet the present population space formula.

Table 1 gets down to specific facts about the library and building situation. Column 1 lists the major standard factors. Column 2 gives the present nationally used standards. These do not represent the rosy dreams of wishful librarians but are fair and realistic and have already been exceeded by many libraries. The financial support standard, line 3, for example, was increased by A.L.A. in 1964 from \$3.50 per capita, due to nationwide increase in salaries and wages in almost every field of activity, and increase in cost of books and other materials. Numerous cities are supporting their libraries at \$5 or \$6 per capita, out of public funds. See footnotes for other discussion. Column 3 shows what the present situation is. Column 4 shows what it should now be, and Column 5 shows what to provide for twenty years hence.

TABLE 1. MAJOR FACTORS IN DECATUR LIBRARY SITUATION

| 1. Factor | 2. Standards* | 3. At Present | 4. Should Be Now | 5. For Twenty Years Hence |
|-------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| 2. Population | xxxxxx | 83,000 ¹ | assume 83,000 | 105,000 ¹ |
| 3. Expenditures | \$3.82 p. cap. | \$289,000 ² | \$317,000 | \$400,000 |
| 4. Books | 2 v.p. cap. | 164,000 ³ | 166,000 v. | 210,000 v. |
| 5. Registration | 1/3 pop. | 30,500 ⁴ | 27,600 | 35,000 |
| 6. Circulation | 8.5 p. cap. | 583,400 v. | 705,500 v. | @8=840,000 v. |
| 7. Ref. Questions | 3/4-1 p.cap. | 70,000 | 62,500-83,000 | 76,000-105,000 |
| BUILDING FACTORS | | | | |
| 8. Book Capac. | 2 vols. p.c. | 164,000 v. | 166,000 v. | 210,000 v. |
| 9. Seats | 2.5 per 1,000 pop. | 140 | 207 | 262 |
| 10. Main Floor | .225 sq.ft. p.cap | 8,060 | 18,675 | 23,625 |
| 11. Total Space | .5 sq.ft.p.c. | 22,200 | 41,500 | 50,250 |
| 12. Cost estim. | \$10 + 25% ⁵ | gift, 1903 | \$1,037,500 ⁶ | \$1,312,500 ⁶ |

*These standards, mostly set up by A.L.A., are discussed in Wheeler & Goldhor Practical Administration of Public Libraries. 1962, chapter 8 and pages 554, 556. Also Costs of Public Library Service. 1964. A.L.A.

1. Prentice-Hall and Gery estimates averaged.
2. '64-'65 budget, etc.
3. For fiscal year ending 4/30/64
4. Registration is for three years, the period nationally taken as standard.
5. Add 10% for air conditioning, 15% for furnishing and equipment.
6. All cost estimates are only approximate; they vary in different parts of the country, and are now inflated by the national building boom. But a careful architect can omit unprofitable space and structure if he studies the problem.

ENLARGE AND REMODEL?

As it seems to be already recognized that attempts to enlarge this building would be largely a matter of "throwing good money down the drain", and a quarter million dollars have been spent in the last fifteen years to try to keep the present building in usable shape, we do not go into discussion of this idea. The writer has recommended and worked on several sound and profitable enlargements which could safely be predicted as successful, and is sympathetic to the purpose of "making do". But this is not such a case. The long flight of front steps, the cut-up character of the interior, the impossibility of getting enough new space on any one side, of the present building, and integrating old and new space efficiently, preclude any successful enlargement in Decatur. The writer has just come from a library where a very large addition fifteen years ago has been a daily headache for staff and public, and a pending quarter million dollars remodeling job will help very little.

EFFECT OF BRANCHES AND SCHOOL LIBRARIES?

We are covering briefly topics which almost inevitably come up in a project like the present. For a city of 83,000 now, and even for 105,000 population twenty years hence, the library is already over-branched. A branch cannot be justified unless it will have at least 75,000 circulation and can afford a full time children's librarian and full time reference librarian, both college and library school trained. Branches, like school libraries, stimulate greater use of the main library, and patrons of branches and school libraries use the stronger resources of the main library every day because it would be an extravagant duplication to provide these more specialized and intensive materials and services, at each agency.

Similarly it is a costly misguided idea that some of the central library operations can be separated and placed a few blocks or even one block away. This is a false attempt at supposed economy, for it separates vitally connected elements and involves hourly time and salary waste.

HOW MUCH BUILDING IS NEEDED?

Everything starts with the population of the city. We have taken an arbitrary compromise between the Prentice-Hall and Gery estimates of Decatur population for 1965, and for twenty years hence, in 1985. Practically all new public library buildings attempt to provide for their first twenty years, because any changes or enlargements in that brief span are so costly in proportion to space or convenience gained, that they waste the taxpayers' money by mistaken economy.

Lines 8 to 12 of Table 1 give the basis for preliminary space and cost estimates. It is much more important to have enough space on the main floor than to meet the standard for total floor space, because for public service convenience it is the main floor where the most essential purposeful adult services are carried on. Mezzanine or balcony space is the most efficient and least expensive supplement or substitute for main floor space, as explained elsewhere*, and discussed on the following page.

* See J. L. Wheeler, Small Library Buildings A.L.A. 1963.

We need 23,600 square feet of main floor space, which means at least that much ground space, and it would be desirable to have 50,000 square feet of total floor space, if we meet the standard formula to provide for an estimated 105,000 population in 1985. However, as the writer is chiefly responsible for these size formulas, based on analysis of many buildings of the last twenty years, it may be said that while several libraries, like the gift building at Elkhart, exceed the formulas, a resourceful architect and consultant can work out efficient economical plans by omitting wasteful stairs and lobbys, reflecting pools, ornamental columns and other attempts at architectural show-off, and slice perhaps 10 per cent from the size estimates. In the present case, because Decatur is above normal in library use and demands and because the wave of high school and college student use is greater than librarians foresaw even five years ago, such economies need to be studied with care and with understanding of library operations.

EFFECTIVE LOCATION FOR NEW DECATUR LIBRARY

All the foregoing leads up to the major question now under public discussion, with a wide variety of ideas offered. Pressure groups are attempting to tie the library to some other objective while overlooking the welfare of the library. Due to misconceptions of library objectives, operations and services in many cities, the question of location has been threshed out rather thoroughly and the consensus of public librarians in 1965 is the same as it was in 1958 when this writer gathered opinions and cases from over 100 libraries* and made it clear that a public library should be in the heart of the downtown shopping and pedestrian stream. At a building workshop in New York State, August 1964, the 37 city, county and regional library heads were in unanimous agreement on this, even before it come up for discussion.

Every library board and librarian strives to get every dollar possible, every good book possible, every able staff member possible, to help meet a public demand which is increasing everywhere every month. The question is, how to get the greatest use, the greatest turnover per book, the largest circulation and reference use per dollar of the taxpayer's money. The library is basically a public service institution. It should be the most beautiful building in its city, but it is something primarily for maximum use and not merely to look at.

SUGGESTED SITES

The writer approached this matter uninfluenced by other citizen's or librarian's opinion. He made a preliminary study of the downtown blocks before being handed a list of six sites which have been suggested or advocated by various persons or groups. Through the courtesy of the librarian he was taken to see some sites outside the central area. The librarian refrained from expressing or implying any opinion as to site. He made a second more careful study of the blocks between Eldorado and Wood, Church and Franklin Streets, also the relationship of Greenwood Development and two possible areas where a new group of public "cultural" or community group meeting centers might be placed.

*J. L. Wheeler, Effective Location of Public Library Buildings 50 p. 1958
University of Illinois Press

One site proposed is within a block diagonally across from the present building. It is hard to see what would be gained by this move. It seemed incredible also that anyone would feel that a public library would flourish out westward near the Art Institute or the University. It can be said with assurance in the light of what has happened in some other cities, that public use of the library even with a new building, would drop 30 to 35 per cent, if the new library went so far west, away from "the center of gravity".

The heart and busiest corner of Decatur appears to be at Water and William Streets. Every block away from this corner means a decrease in library use. No proposed site at any reasonable cost, is closer to it than the present site. It is almost certain that a new building on the present plot will jump the routine of business 35 to 40 per cent within the first year or two.

For more than a quarter century, the literature of city planning and municipal growth has included many articles, chapters and statements by city planners themselves, as well as by such interested observers as Lewis Mumford, which indicate that while twenty years ago "Civic Centers" were in great vogue, many now question their practicality. True, it sounds logical to create a group of, or "coordinate", several public buildings, just because they are public buildings, in what is generally a costly and pretentious style with considerable landscaped grounds surrounding them. Today it is more fully recognized that the interests of the community will be best served by placing each public building where its particular clientele and its objectives will be best met.

More recently this once popular but delusive idea has been modified, and numerous cities are creating so called "cultural centers". No question is raised here as to their community value. The writer's interest in art, local history and science exhibits led him to become for several years a member of the American Association of Museums, and any public library should cooperate in various "cultural" activities. The point in the present study is that a public library does not belong in a cultural center, unless it is in the downtown heart of the city. And this almost never happens, because some of a cultural center's activities include concert and performance halls which draw large crowds at a given time and require hundreds of parking spaces, and the cost of sufficient ground in the heart of the downtown area is prohibitive.

The public library is indeed a cultural building; there is little real culture which does not involve the priceless habit of looking up information, of sitting down quietly to read and reflect on inspiring and constructive books, which broaden and enrich mind and soul. But the library is a matter of individual use, not of a crowd or group all focused on one idea or performance at the same time. Most cultural center activities involve evening programs where all concerned are trying to get there on time after dinner, and do not leave the auditorium or meeting place until after 9 p.m., when the library has closed.

We repeat that we do not wish to question here the desirability of a civic center. But we point out that a public library not only has a right to have its own important objectives given consideration, but its thousands of patrons have a right to see that the library is located to attract the greatest possible use and give the greatest possible service. The Pittsburg, Philadelphia and San Francisco Public Libraries, for example have been stymied for years by being in cultural centers.*

*See Keith Doms' chapter on Library Buildings in the International City Managers' Association 1964 book Local Public Library Administration. Mr. Doms is Director of Carnegie Library of Pittsburg,

Neither will this be at some new site where "parking" will be easier. Parking is not "Criteria No. 1" for locating a library. Among numerous cases to prove this is the San Diego experience, where the public refused to vote a library bond issue when a civic center site was proposed, but approved it when it was decided to rebuild on its old downtown site. During this building period the library had to find temporary quarters. It moved to a beautiful empty exposition building in Balboa Park just a mile away, where it had all the floor space it needed and could be arranged efficiently. Parking was ideal there. The result was a drop of 25% circulation and 30% in reference service. Similar cases could be recited. At Atlanta the four busiest branches, two of them lending a quarter million books each, are in the most strategic locations; the two least successful are in poor locations as we have defined them, and have so little patronage even with easy parking that they are scheduled to be folded up.

In all this matter of library location the long time studies and observation lead to one clear conclusion: build the new library on the ground now owned by the city where the library now stands. If the plot were too small, if the site were less strategic, there might be some question about this. No one location seems agreed on for a cultural center and those which were reported to us under discussion, are not so good for the library as its present site.

It is often the case that city planners and community growth specialists disagree on their ideas and recommendations. It is therefore more than significant that numerous city planners and library consultants have come up, independently of each other, with one unanimous recommendation: build the new Decatur library on the present site. Among those who have so recommended are (1) Dr. Ernest Reese of University of Illinois Library School, formerly of Columbia University Library School; (2) Gruen Associates, city planners; (3) Bartholomew Associates, city planners; (4) Ralph Ulveling, Librarian and (5) Charles Mohrhardt, Assistant Librarian, Detroit Public Library, probably the two most able library building consultants in the middle west; (6) Dr. Herbert Goldhor, Director University of Illinois Library School and former Director Evansville Public Library; (7) the present writer who has probably made more library building studies (136) and written more about public library buildings, and served as consultant on more buildings, than anyone else; (8) the Librarian, Mrs. Howe, whose opinions I asked for while writing up this report and whose realistic understanding of community problems is not to be overlooked.

The State of New York in its criteria for making grants under the 1964 Federal Aid for Library Services and Construction Act, makes it a definite requirement that a new library be placed in the heart of the pedestrian stream in its city or town. Finally another library building consultant, Hoyt Galvin, stresses the economic factor which we have touched on: "Selection of a site purely on a basis of economy is a mistake. To secure a successful site, it is often necessary to pay a third to half as much for the land as for the construction of the library building. But getting a good site should be the first thought ...The annual operating cost...will usually be from a quarter to half the cost of the building. If we assume the annual operating cost to be only a quarter of the cost of the building, the operation of the library service within twenty years will have been five times the cost of the building. In view of such costs, it is a community waste to operate a library on an inferior site. If it is good business for the successful merchant building a retail store to purchase an expensive site (i.e., in the heart of downtown where front foot values are very high, but where turnover will be fast and profitable), it is equally important for the library to do likewise."*

*Hoyt Galvin and M. Van Buren, The Small Public Library Building. 137 p. 1959, p. 51.

There seems substantial evidence and agreement, and no valid evidence whatever to the contrary, that the present site is by far the most strategic and advantageous for the Decatur Public Library. The 23,000 square feet of the standard formula is available. In addition, there are more than 10,000 square feet of parking space at the rear. But in addition there is also Municipal Parking Lot No. 3. If the old house on North Street, between Church and Main is acquired and eliminated, it would be a civic improvement, and a new easy access and more parking will be possible. It is suggested that a two or three level parking building be erected when needed, for the convenience of people using this entire block.

Some suggestions about the building itself, in the interest of efficiency and economy, have been forwarded separately to the Librarian. It should come directly to the front sidewalk line, be constructed at sidewalk level, and passers-by should be able to look into its busy, attractive interesting interior.

May I thank the numerous persons who were so helpful in assembling the material for this study. It is my belief that Decatur with its notable library service, its material and cultural progress, is in an enviable position to go ahead promptly and attain one of the most beautiful, efficient and economical library buildings in the entire middle west. Many libraries are underway, but of these few are designed with the simple straightforward graciousness which should characterise the modern public library. Few are as cordial, lively and welcoming in their general aspect as a public library should be in 1965. Some have permitted architectural stunts and oddities, and have run up costs by trying to be impressive or ornamental. A really good library building may cost less than a mediocre or bizarre one. Decatur may, with care, have a library to show to all the world with pride; one which the whole community will use with immense satisfaction. This is a project in which every citizen may join with enthusiasm.

Joseph L. Wheeler
Consultant

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