

Possible Short-Term
Building Alterations
for the
Round Lake Area
Public Library
District

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I. INTRODUCTION

This report includes a variety of possible short-term building alterations for the Round Lake Area Public Library District. The intent of the report is to suggest fairly inexpensive projects that may help the library in the years until major expansion or new construction can take place.

The focus of the report is on library functions, not on aesthetics.

None of the changes can deal directly with the library's major structural problem, which is substantial lack of space. The population served by the library exceeds 40,000, but the building has only 36,000 square feet. Most public libraries have between one and two square feet per capita, so the Round Lake library building is definitely small for the size of community it serves.

Because the report focuses on possible changes, it tends to zero in on problems and not say a great deal about the library's strong points. The library building is an attractive and generally functional structure. More importantly, the library has an excellent collection and an outstanding staff. While visiting the library, I've had many opportunities to see the interactions between staff and users. All the members of the library staff are extraordinarily friendly and outgoing and helpful and considerate—far more so than the staffs of many other libraries—and this alone can make a library great. My experience has been that outstanding public service occurs from the top down.

Although I've met with almost all of the library staff, most of the ideas in this report were developed in conversations with Library Director Jim DiDonato and departmental managers, and when the report that follows says "library staff" I mean this more limited group.

This report includes a substantial amount of explanatory material. **Specific recommendations for action are in bold face.**

II. EXTERIOR

A survey of the exterior of the building is really beyond the scope of this report, but the structure appears to be solid and in good repair.

The new parking lot was being finished when I first visited the library. I never saw the previous parking lot, but everyone tells me it was in poor repair.

I saw no signs of serious water infiltration from the roof (acoustic ceiling tiles are a great indicator of roof leakage) or around the windows.

I also saw no stair-step cracks in the facing brick, which are a familiar indicator of settlement.

III. LENDING DEPARTMENT

III-A. Lighting

The lighting at the lending desk area does not work very well. The problem is exacerbated by the complex ceiling structure, which includes a variety of heights, a variety of light fixtures, and a mixture of acoustic tile and drywall. The variations in ceiling structure and height appear to have been an artistic decision on the part of the architect rather than a functional one.

Drywall ceilings in libraries almost always cause major problems because it is difficult to access the mechanical equipment (air ducts, reheat coils, electrical conduit, sprinkler pipes, etc.) above them. It is also much harder to change lighting because many simple modern fixtures are designed to be installed in suspended ceilings.

The portion of the area with high ceilings has pendant fixtures providing a mixture of reflected uplight and downlight. These fixtures strike me as somewhat dim, but replacing the can lights in the soffit areas may result in a sufficient fix.

The pendant fixtures have liner material to block the direct view of fluorescent tubes through the perforations. In one fixture, this material is damaged. It may be possible to simply replace the liner. (Between the first and final drafts of this report, the library staff corrected this problem.)

The library recently replaced the ballasts on the can lights (recessed down lights). According to the staff, the lights were very bright when the ballasts were first replaced, but they quickly dimmed.

In my opinion, can lights are always a very bad choice for libraries. They created a great deal of unpleasant glare, and they cast harsh shadows. The only good use is on staircases, where harsh shadows help clarify the location of steps.

Tearing into the ceiling to install new recessed fixtures to replace the can lights would probably be very expensive, in part because of the drywall ceiling.

Instead, direct-indirect fluorescent fixtures could be surface mounted on the ceiling over the current can light openings. This would provide far more even and gentle illumination and reduce glare.

III-B. Lending desk

The lending desk is showing its age, and one section (the west end) appears to be a home-made addition.

In addition, the desk has no book return slot, and the library instead has a massive book return box across the lobby from the desk. This is awkward because the box takes up a lot of floor space and because staff members frequently have to empty it, trucking returned books across the lobby, and through the lending desk, squeezing past any users standing in the lobby.

I think a new desk could be constructed that would provide better engineered spaces for staff and incorporate a book return bin.

Staff members feel that two standing-height checkout stations and two seated-height stations would be correct. A return bin could be provided at the west end of the desk and separated by an aisle from four checkout stations.

The main design challenges with return bins are (a) making them high enough so that a bin on casters fits comfortably beneath and (b) locating them where users returning books and users borrowing books do not get in each other's way.

It might be possible to reuse the current return box, but it is massive, and a narrower one may be necessary to fit four checkout stations, the return bin, and a staff aisle into the available space.

New lending desk units can be built by a local cabinet maker. The main thing to stress is that lending desks should be modular furniture, not kitchen cabinets. All four units should be separate, so that they can easily be moved, rearranged, etc. In my opinion, custom built lending desks are much superior to those available through library supply catalogs, and probably not much more expensive.

Lending desks need:

1. **Tough surfaces** (Corian or solid-core laminates are fine, but standard high-pressure laminates are too fragile).
2. **Toe kicks** on the user side.
3. **Grommet holes** for wiring.
4. **Cable trays** for internal wire management (110-volt and data wiring cannot share the same tray).
5. **Simple, flat tops.**

6. **Standard surface sizes for individual staff workstations.** With most desks, each workstation needs surface space for a bar code reader, computer monitor, mouse pad, computer keyboard, and telephone. Some libraries have receipt printers or credit card readers.

With a 3-M security system, some libraries place desensitizing bricks on top of their desks and others construct ledges below desk top.
7. **A minimum of one checkout station that meets ADA and Illinois Accessibility Code requirements.** You will want to have your cabinet maker check current requirements.
8. **Knee space for staff members, both at seated height and standing height desks.** Providing full knee space for a staff member at an accessible desk may lead to a very deep top, and you may have to compromise. Knee room at standing height desks is important because some staff members prefer to sit at high stools.
9. **Standing height desks are more friendly for face-to-face contact with adult users, while seated-height desks are important for services to children and to users in wheelchairs.** Libraries with more than one checkout station need both.
10. **To keep modular desks units from shifting out of line, they can be bolted together.** Bolt holes need to be carefully standardized to allow modules to be rearranged.
11. **All modules should have finished ends to allow rearrangement.**
12. **Standing height units need flat storage drawers if leg clearance is sufficient for staff members seated on high stools.** All drawers require ball-bearing double-extension hardware and light-colored interiors.
13. **Book return slots need to be in units high enough to accommodate chutes and standard-height receiving bins.** Library supply catalogs have a variety of plastic bins on casters that work well. With back-room checkin, switching bins should be made as simple and quick as possible.
14. **Return slots have to be large enough for most books but small enough to keep users from reaching through the slots to retrieve interesting-looking items.** Amazing tangles occur when books are not checked in properly because they have been diverted from the workflow.
15. **Keeping your cash register behind the desk, as you do now, seems to be a very good solution.**

When your cabinet maker prepares drawings for your new lending desk components, please email them to me for review.

III-C. Used book sale

The book sale shelving is extensive, but it seems to be the right size, since it is reasonably full. **If the can lights in the ceiling are replaced with direct-indirect fixtures, as noted in section III-A above, light on book sale books should be improved. As things now are, the can lights cast unpleasant shadows, with users' heads frequently blocking light on the books they are inspecting.**

III-D. Security gates

Your staff have proposed straightening out your two security gates, since the current arrangement leads almost all users to prefer a single gate. This makes great sense to me.

I think you could talk with 3-M about lowering the sensitivity of your security gates. As things now stand, there appear to be a lot of false alarms, and staff routinely wave users through the gates when the alarms go off. My experience has been that it's better to have the gates miss a number of books that have not been desensitized than to have alarms go off with books legitimately checked out.

III-E. Welcome station

I think your lobby welcome station is one of the library's best features. It seems ideally positioned. The fact that it can be moved around makes it possible to close the barricade when the meeting room is in use but the rest of the library is closed.

III-F. Coffee service

We discussed locating a coffee brewer at the east end of the lobby, but we think it might be better to locate it in the Adult Department, just to the south as users enter the department. With the welcome station, security gates, lending desk, book return provision, and book sale shelving, the lobby seems sufficiently crowded. See below.

Alternatively, the coffee service could be located in the vestibule, where the vending machines are now located.

III-G. Staff workroom

The staff workroom is packed, but improving it may have to wait for a larger building.

III-H. Acoustics

Due to its architectural design, the staircase is a very noisy structure.

Noises from the Youth Department are heard too easily at the lending desk, and the conversations among people entering the library are heard in the Youth Department.

The hard surfaced, sloped ceiling and the ceramic tile staircase both contribute to unpleasant noise transmission between the two floors of the library. The staircase is basically an echo chamber.

The library has added some pinnable panels to the walls of the staircase, but they are not sufficient to control noise. Acoustic panels would probably do better.

Possible solutions to the problem include:

- **Removing the speakers on the game computers at the foot of the stairs and replace them with ear phones.**
- **Moving the Youth Department game computers and other educational toys away from the base of the staircase.** These are a major source of noise heard on the main floor. If the area had study tables or shelving, far less noise would be conducted to the lending department.
- **Carpeting the ceramic tile steps.** Aluminum nosings with flexible plastic inserts are available that would prolong the life of the carpet.
- **Adding an acoustic surface to the ceiling of the staircase.** Unfortunately, this would conceal a significant architectural feature of the library—the wood ceiling and skylight over the staircase.
- **Adding glass partitions with glass doors to separate the staircase from the lending desk on the main floor and the Youth Department on the lower level.** Unfortunately, there does not appear to be sufficient room for a partition on either floor, and the cost of installing a partition could be expensive due to HVAC modifications.

The ideas are listed in order of practicality. The first involves a modest expenditure for earphones, and the second requires only some rearrangement of the Youth Department.

Carpeting the steps would help somewhat. An acoustic ceiling in the staircase would cover an attractive architectural feature of the building. And there appears to be insufficient room for glass partitions.

IV. ADULT DEPARTMENT

IV-A. Lighting

Lighting in the central area of the Adult Department is very good, with pendant upright fixtures providing soft but bright illumination.

Unfortunately, lighting in the stack areas to the north and south is far less successful due to the architect's decision to provide low ceilings. Both stack areas are lighted with 2 by 4 foot troffers spaced 4 feet apart. Because the lights shine straight down, the ceilings are dark and look gloomy when viewed from the central area of the department. ("Troffers" are light fixtures designed to fit into the gridwork of suspended ceilings.)

Because the center-to-center spacing of the fixtures is not the same as the center-to-center spacing of the stack aisles, the relationship between the light fixtures and the aisles varies. Some aisles are well lighted, with light fixtures directly over the aisles, while other aisles have no fixtures over them and are relatively dark. (This problem is not unique to your library. Architects have done the same thing in many other libraries, and it always causes lighting problems.)

Creating proper lighting would involve raising the ceilings to at least 10 feet to enable the use of pendant upright fixture. Unfortunately, raising the ceilings would almost certainly involve relocating HVAC ducts, sprinkler pipes, and electrical conduit. If long-term plans include expanding the library rather than constructing a new building, raising the ceilings will need to be part of the project, but in the short run it will be too expensive.

Another solution would involve filling in the four-foot gaps between the existing fixtures with additional four-foot fixtures, but this would also lead to problems with MEP equipment above the ceilings.

The best solution appears to be adding some additional two-by-two-foot troffers over poorly illuminated aisles, placing them where MEP equipment above the ceilings allows. The best time to do this will be after any relocation of shelving has taken place, or at least when relocation decisions are definite.

IV-B. Excess book trucks

The north cross aisle of the Adult Department stacks is lined with a large number of unused book trucks. The book trucks crowd the aisle and make it inaccessible to users with disabilities. They are also fairly unsightly.

The book trucks stored in the aisle could be discarded or placed in off-site storage.

IV-C. Non-fiction shelving

Adult non-fiction shelving has empty top shelves that do not match the shelving below. **Since this shelving is very high and the library has no plans to use it, the best solution appears to be to remove the empty top shelves.**

In some areas of non-fiction, particularly the 600s and 700s, shelves are so close together that many books are shelved on their fore edges. This is hard on bindings. **If shelf spacing in these areas is altered by moving the lowest occupied shelves down so they touch the unused bottom shelves, then increasing spacing between shelves by one slot in the support posts, most books can stand upright.** Books that are still too tall can lie flat on the unused bottom shelves.

The library might review changing other areas of non-fiction to drop the first occupied shelves by a couple of slots.

The library's newest shelving is Estey shelving painted gray. This is a very fine brand of shelving, and gray is a color that (a) doesn't show dust, (b) doesn't soak up a lot of light, and (c) lends itself to any long-term changes in color schemes. I think that all of the library's Estey shelving will serve well in an expanded or new building, and that the other unmatched shelving will be very useful in storerooms.

IV-D. Fiction shelving

Some areas of fiction shelving are overcrowded, despite vigorous weeding of the collection. **The height of the 60-inch-high shelving could be increased to 90 inches, either through purchasing new 90-inch welded frames or by swapping fiction and non-fiction shelving.** I'd be inclined to just purchase new frames. The Estey dealer for Illinois is Al Treiber (847-934-3202), who is very helpful when it comes to ordering spare parts.

You may have enough extra shelves lying around so that you can just buy new frames, but the effect is a lot better when things match.

IV-E. User seating

The department has some comfortable places to sit, but it does not take advantage of the south windows. The area with the hexagonal computer tables appears awkward and gives the impression of being furnished with a variety of unmatched tables.

At the east end of the building, stacks could be relocated to the north to allow tables or armchairs to be located along the windows. Rather than have staff try to relocate shelving units, which requires unloading units, piling books everywhere, removing shelves, picking up units one staff member to a post, shuffling the units to new locations, replacing shelves, and replacing books, it makes a lot more sense to hire Hallett movers, who have equipment to transport fully loaded stack ranges.

Although the overhang above the south windows make keep direct sun out in the summer, **in the winter tables and chairs located there will be in direct sunlight, which is too bright for reading, and the windows will require blinds.** The best blinds I've seen for this type of situation are made of perforated white vinyl.

Departmental user seating consists of a somewhat unmatched set of furnishings, including an former index table with the central shelving removed. Some of this furniture could be replaced, but the desirability of long-term uniformity suggests it may be better to just “get along” until major expansion or new construction. Any new tables should be without aprons (side or end skirts) to facilitate access for users in wheelchairs.

IV-F. Coffee service

One good place for a coffee brewer is to the right of the entrance to the department as users enter the department. Brewers appear to be relatively quiet, and a location directly south of the entry door is far enough from reading tables and computers.

Coffee brewers need to be plumbed to prevent library staff from having to constantly refill the equipment.

Coffee pods can be sold at the lending desk for the time being. In a larger library they could be sold through a vending machine.

As noted above, another possible location is the vestibule, where the library already maintains vending machines. Whether there is a basement beneath the vestibule may affect the relative costs of the two approaches.

IV-G. Reference desk

The reference desk appears to be satisfactory at this time.

IV-H. Staff workspace

The Adult Department staff workroom is painfully overcrowded. The only way to provide additional workspace in the library would be to convert public areas to staff areas, and this is probably not politically feasible.

IV-I. Storage

The Adult Department has essentially no storage space. Programming equipment and supplies are crammed into the adult staff workroom.

Because space is at a major premium in the library, the only possibility appears to be exterior storage, either in another shed or in a rented storage unit somewhere. Both approaches have problems. Outdoor sheds are close but have bad climates. Storage units are usually too remote for quick retrieval.

I'd be inclined to tough it out for everything except equipment like steel shelving components, temporarily unused book trucks, and unused furniture.

V. YOUNG ADULT DEPARTMENT

V-A. User seating

One of the least successful architect-designed features in the building is the Young Adult reading area, which consists of two small oval tables and some padded benches on a raised platform. The tables are too small for serious work, and they are awkward because they are in fixed locations. Electrical outlets are located by the tables, but it takes a contortionist to use them. Despite the implication of space, each table provides effective space for about one person. Because the platform is raised, the library has had to add a ramp.

To the north of the platform are three shelving units that are not being used and one oversized armchair.

The director, Adult Department manager, YA librarian and I talked about the YA area in detail and think the following is a good solution:

1. **Remove and eliminate the current platform, tables, benches, and low shelving.** The platform appears to be built of wood and should be easy to rip out.
2. **Recarpet the area where the platform was removed.** To accentuate that the area is separate from the Adult Department, a gaudier color could be used.
3. **Relocate the two westernmost 90 inch shelving units to the south wall of the alcove, along the north side of the Adult Department office.**
4. **Purchase new (movable) furniture to create two or three six-person booths, with the benches oriented east-west.** The west ends of the booths can be against the wall, although access from both ends would be more flexible. By rearranging these new furnishings, the area can be used for a variety of functions. The Palos Heights Public Library has similar furniture, although you may not want the backs on benches to be that high.
5. **Install the large computer screen now stored in the Adult Department staff workroom on the north wall of the YA alcove.**
6. **Install pinnable walls where there are no shelves,** to allow flexible posting of artwork.

V-B. Shelving

The remainder of the YA shelving appears to be workable.

VI. YOUTH DEPARTMENT

VI-A. Lighting

The staff of the Youth Department complain about the glare from the troffer fixtures. Unfortunately, given the low ceiling and the likelihood of a maze of ducts and piping above, raising the ceiling to allow proper library lighting would probably be too expensive for short-term modifications.

As in the Adult Department, some light fixtures fail to line up properly with some book aisles. Again, the short-term solution appears to be installing some two-by-two troffers after final decisions have been made on shelf locations.

VI-B. Shelving

Some of the Youth Department shelving on the north side of the room could be relocated to standardize aisle widths, probably leaving enough space for an extra range of shelving.

Several improvements could be made in Youth Department shelving, but all require more floor space. Basic improvements include making some shelves lower and replacing picture book shelving with flip bins.

VI-C. HVAC issues

The HVAC duct by the parenting books (near the courtyard door) puts out an unpleasant blast of cold air. It should be possible to adjust the volume or raise the temperature. (The library staff appear to have corrected this since the first draft of this report was prepared.)

VI-D. Activity Room

The Activity Room is a pleasant and well designed space, handicapped primarily by the lack of a storage closet. (In defense of the original architect, the small staff office located north of the Activity Room was originally a closet.)

One way to improve the flexibility and functions of the Activity Room is to add a ceiling-mounted digital projector and accompanying sound system. The supporting electronics could be located in one of the locking cabinets at the west end of the room.

A screen can be installed in the front of the room. To keep children from playing with the screen, it could be motor driven with a key switch.

Adding a ceiling-mounted projector will allow the department to eliminate the TV cart currently maintained in the Activity Room and provide a far better picture and sound for children's programs.

VI-E. Staff workspaces

Youth Department staff members are crammed into a small staff workroom and two small attached offices, one of which started out as a storage closet for the Activity Room.

Minor furniture changes may be possible, but there seems to be no way to make workspaces adequately large until the library is expanded or a new building constructed.

One possibility is to add standard steel 90" cantilever shelving to the north and west walls. Shelves can be omitted from the vertical standards where they would interfere with other furnishings. The main trick is locating shelving where the protruding feet do not get in the way of furnishings or feet. (Wall-mounted bracket shelving would not have feet, but it is too flimsy for library use.)

VII. MEETING ROOM

As public libraries increasingly become community centers, meeting rooms are in tremendous demand both for library programs and for community events.

The library meeting room is extremely heavily used despite a number of functional problems. The movable partition has all of the problems associated with partitions of that type, and when the room is divided into two sections, there is no way for library users to get to the eastern half of the room without walking through the western half. The kitchenette is also unavailable to users in the east half of the room when the room is divided. The meeting room has no attached storeroom, and any furniture not in use must be piled around the edges of the room. Sounds carry too well between the meeting room and the rest of the library and between the two halves of the meeting room when the room is divided.

I don't see any easy solutions to the problems with the meeting room. I'd be inclined to live with it for now, recognizing that an enlarged or new building will have to devote a vastly larger and better engineered space to meeting rooms.

VIII. STAFF WORK AREAS

Library staff, including departmental staff, administrative staff, janitorial staff, and IT staff, are crammed into inadequate workspaces everywhere. This is good for camaraderie and for communication, but it doesn't make things efficient.

When the library is expanded, or a new building constructed, a greatly larger amount of space will be needed for staff.

IX. STORAGE

The library has extraordinarily little storage space and no space that can be converted to storage. As noted above, the only short-term approaches appear to be (a) live with it, (b) build another shed by the parking lot, or (c) rent storage space somewhere.