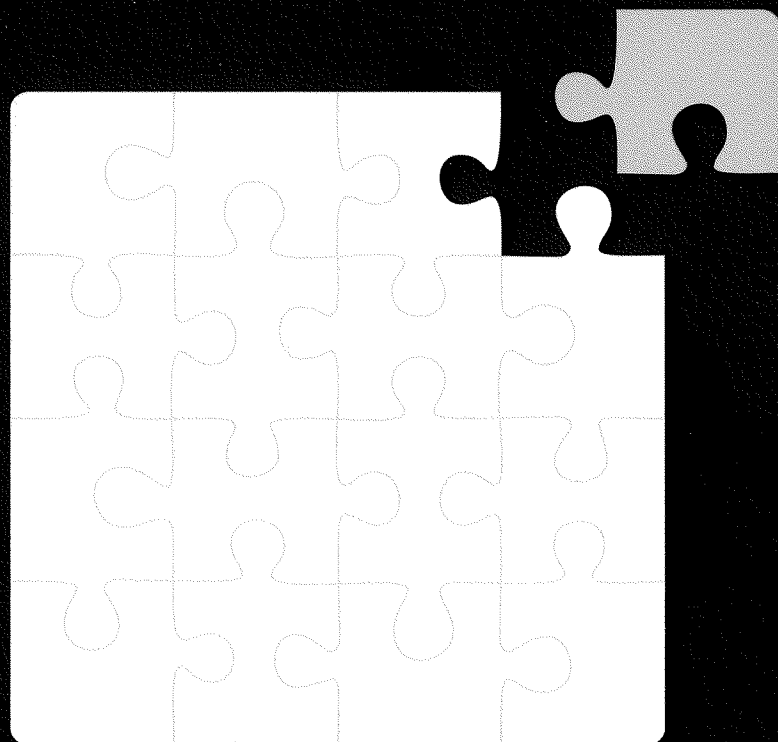


DIANTHA DOW SCHULL



50+

library services

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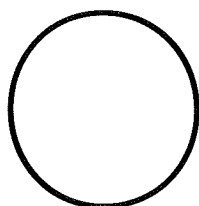
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THE 50+ PLACE

In the future, people may not need to come to the library for information.
But they will come in droves if they perceive it as a desirable place.

—Fred Kent, president, Project for Public Spaces



Over the past thirty years the physical library has become more complex, with the addition of multiple systems for content storage and communications and multiple spaces for educational and civic functions. These changes are transformational, affecting the entire experience of the library as a physical destination. Simultaneously, scientific understanding of aging processes has increased, including knowledge of the factors that contribute to health and longevity. This too is transformational, raising societal awareness of the "bonus" years and approaches for optimizing those years.

50+ library services are at the intersection of these two developments. Trends in library design have implications for positive aging, and new knowledge of positive aging has implications for the design of libraries.

TRENDS

Aging Research

Beyond the numbers and the policy debates about aging, there are several trends in social planning and research on aging that have direct bearing on how librarians develop their libraries as places for midlife adults and positive aging.

Mental stimulation. Brain health and the fear of losing mental capacity are high on the list of concerns for baby boomers, a group that currently accounts for more than 25 percent of the U.S. population. Recent research on cognition and aging indicates that mental stimulation may aid in improving memory abilities, reasoning, attention focus, and other aspects of cognitive functioning:

Mental stimulation that consists of cognitively challenging activities is a means to facilitate neural plasticity, which can increase cognitive reserve and result in maintained or improved cognitive functioning. . . . Effective mentally stimulating activities should be novel, cognitively challenging, and preferably enjoyable so that older adults remain engaged. *The mental stimulation must make participants' "brains sweat"—a corollary to physical exercise.*¹

The concept of “brain health” is now well accepted, with many gerontologists, neurologists, and other experts recommending that aging adults consciously and regularly promote their brain health by participating in creative activities that foster cognitive stimulation and staying involved in physical or mental activities they enjoy.² These activities can be reinforced through the design of visually stimulating spaces that are flexible, colorful, and aesthetically pleasing.

Social interaction. Some researchers studying longevity are concentrating on the connections between social interaction and healthy aging. Studies repeatedly show that social isolation is a health risk and, conversely, that social interaction offers health benefits including, but not limited to, lower blood pressure, potentially reduced risk for cardiovascular problems, potentially reduced risk for Alzheimer’s disease, and reduced risk for mental health issues such as depression.³ Researchers identify social support and engagement as key behavioral and psychosocial factors that can enhance both mental and physical health.⁴ Recognizing the importance of staying socially connected, aging experts note the value of “Third Places,” places that are neither work nor home, places that offer a neutral, welcoming, alternative environment for all.⁵ Some also note the value of new communications technologies and social media in helping older adults stay connected. Although direct, face-to-face contact seems to be optimal for midlife connections, today’s new media can complement and extend direct contact for the benefit of 50+ generations.

Community engagement. For many 50+ adults, positive aging is related to the extent to which they feel purposeful and involved in a group or community. They want to “give back,” do something meaningful, and stay civically connected.⁶

Recent studies document the health and emotional benefits of community service for older adults, including a 2010 study indicating that “older adults who volunteer and who engage in more hours of volunteering report higher levels of well-being.”⁷ For engagement to occur, individuals must find the appropriate connections. Institutions such as libraries can promote these connections both directly and indirectly.

Independence. Aging specialists often emphasize the importance of control in healthy aging. Loss of control, either physical or mental, leads to dependence.⁸ Institutions working with adults at every stage in the life span need to be attentive to how they can reduce restrictions and enable self-direction. This principle has enormous implications for the design of public spaces, including libraries.

Livable communities. Some community planners are looking at how communities promote positive aging in terms of housing, transportation, educational and cultural opportunities, recreation, health supports, amenities, and public space. With the baby boom population expanding and more and more older adults aging in place—including those in naturally occurring retirement communities—there are greater pressures on all these elements of the community infrastructure. According to Partners for Livable Communities (<http://livable.org>), the goal is to develop “ageless” communities where age is no barrier to safety, mobility, or enjoyment. Librarians concerned with quality-of-life issues for 50+ adults must consider how the library adds features to other community elements that support residents’ engagement in social and civic life. Access and siting are only two considerations; others include amenities, programs, and design of exterior and interior spaces.

LIBRARY DESIGN AND RENOVATION

Until relatively recently the “library” was a known quantity—a static enclosure housing information artifacts. The functions that took place within that enclosure were limited and predictable, consisting primarily of reading and research. Contemporary libraries are far more complex and offer seemingly infinite possibilities for individual exploration, expression, and community interaction. The following four trends in library design suggest ways in which library design today can support positive aging.

Multiple dimensions. Once autonomous, bounded spaces, libraries are now multidimensional. They are both material environments and nodes within diverse networks that work together to give new meaning to the place itself. This transformation, which is ongoing, has implications for how librarians organize their services and programs for 50+ adults and for how these adults interact

with their libraries. Increasingly, patrons can experience the library in more than one dimension: onsite reading and study; face-to-face group interactions; research using library equipment and networks; remote access to databases, texts, and community information; and online participation in forums, book clubs, or distance learning. To help 50+ adults take advantage of these multiple dimensions, librarians must pay close attention to the balance of physical and virtual experiences and the interplay between these dimensions.

Forum functions. Some library space freed up by the contraction of book collections is being allocated for computer labs, workstations, and laptop usage, but more and more space is being allocated for public events and group functions. Instead of a single community room, newer libraries feature varied spaces such as auditoriums, classrooms, meeting rooms, story gardens, galleries, and theaters for convening, performing, displaying, debating, and conversing. Through the use of videos and podcasts the activities within these spaces can be broadcast digitally, communicated to larger audiences beyond the library walls and, even, beyond the local community itself.

Transparency and connectivity. Whereas historically the library was a closed container, a stand-alone entity, the twenty-first-century library is open and transparent, enabling visual and physical contact with the local community and the natural environment through glass cladding, special views, courtyards or atriums, gardens, and even rooftop landscaping. These new libraries, deeply embedded within their environments, may be destination libraries, such as the central library in Salt Lake City, Utah; or key components of multiuse projects, such as the Montgomery County Library at the Rockville, Maryland, Town Center. They may be colocated with a school, museum, or senior center, such as the Mission Creek Branch of the San Francisco Public Library. Whatever the context, the new library is just as connected to its physical surroundings as it is connected electronically to local and global information networks.

Flexibility and self-directed services. As libraries have become more open, with fewer physical boundaries between service areas and generally more porous spatial layouts, they have also become less restrictive in the ways patrons function within these spaces. Self-directed services are now common, with self-checkout devices, browsing areas, and computer labs just a few of the ways libraries are becoming more self-directed environments.

Amenities. Another trend in library design is the increase in amenities, transforming libraries into more pleasurable physical environments with opportunities for informal meeting, relaxation, and aesthetic inspiration. The coffee shop is but one example of this transformation. Twenty years ago the notion of a coffee shop in a library was anathema to most libraries and, even, to most

patrons. Today library coffee shops are ubiquitous. Artwork is displayed in special galleries and throughout public areas. Color, signage, lighting, and furnishings are all increasingly important as the physical experience of the library takes on greater importance. New and renovated libraries, and their special features, are often marketed digitally both to draw people to the building and to signify the attractiveness of the library as a destination within the larger community.

Learning spaces. Along with the allocation of additional space for “forum functions,” libraries are allocating additional space for educational functions that foster learning across the lifespan. These include learning spaces for preschoolers, afterschoolers, tweens, and teens. They also include spaces for older students and adults of all ages: study rooms, smart classrooms, workshops, and technology labs or digital commons. These spaces enable new opportunities for both formal and informal learning which, combined with electronic connections, increase learning opportunities exponentially.

The increase in learning spaces is part of a larger societal emphasis on learning in which libraries are understood as key elements of a “learning society.”⁹ Whether the activities that take place within the learning spaces are initiated by the library, organized through a partnership with another educational institution, or developed by a patron group, they underscore the growing importance of the library as a hub for lifelong learning.

They wanted a gathering place where people with the same interests could meet to swap ideas, meet new people, exchange information and socialize in a relaxed setting.

—Baby boomer survey summary, Kern County (California) Public Library

IMPLICATIONS FOR LIBRARIES

Both sets of trends outlined above have implications for 50+ services. The principles of positive aging can inform library design and renovation, and new approaches to library design can inform 50+ programs and services. As libraries start to examine how they can provide more effective environments for midlife adults, they must consider how to align these trends.

Fortunately, alignment is not a stretch. In fact, today’s library design trends seem ready-made for baby boomers and other active older adults.

- Many of the new features and functions of libraries, such as increased spaces for group functions and face-to-face communication, along with increased options for electronic connectivity, are all congruent with key

principles of healthy aging such as the importance of opportunities and spaces for social interaction, creative expression, and community participation. Intentional planning and programming of these spaces will help to animate libraries as 50+ places.

- Libraries that offer new opportunities and spaces for midlife learning—peer-led learning, informal learning, academic learning, self-directed learning—are libraries that are attentive to mental stimulation, one of the most important factors in positive aging. Brain expert Paul Nussbaum calls the library a “a clinic for the mind.”¹⁰
- With respect to connectivity and the potential to use the library in a variety of dimensions, midlife adults are a key patron cohort that stands to benefit. They are seeking information and connections as well as face-to-face interaction. The new library offers options for usage that match the widely varying communication habits and capacities of 50+ adults and their growing demand for connectivity.
- The recent emphasis on amenities in libraries aligns with the new emphasis on livability in community and urban planning for older adults. New or renovated libraries that are deliberately designed as attractive and stimulating destinations for midlife adults can help to strengthen the overall community infrastructure for an aging America.
- The shift in libraries from restricted, staff-controlled spaces and services to more self-directed environments aligns with the importance of independence, options, and self-directed activities for healthy aging. Betty Turock, one of the first library leaders to advocate increased attention to older adults, stated: “We know from studies that older adults’ learning activities are largely independent, self directed and self-paced. In the library elders travel at their own pace; are joint planners in their learning programs with librarians; assess their own needs and interests and set their own goals.”¹¹

This brief summary underscores the potential to link new knowledge of aging with library planning and design. However, despite that potential, the current landscape is uneven at best. With several stellar exceptions, such as the Tempe Public Library’s Tempe Connections Café, profiled below, there has been much less attention paid to the physical aspects of the 50+ library than to programmatic activities. This is unfortunate, inasmuch as the most exciting and well-designed programs can suffer in a nonconductive environment.

There are obviously several reasons for a relative lack of attention to the library as place. Certainly current fiscal challenges are a primary barrier. Funds

to reorganize or reequip a room or a floor are almost nonexistent. Time is also a factor. With pressure to expand direct service programs, planning for space reallocation and accommodation of new functions may seem impossible for an institution or department operating with minimal staff. The lack of staff training in midlife adult services is another challenge. Although there are (albeit very few) continuing education opportunities enabling librarians to acquire some basics of learning behaviors and the importance of peer involvement for 50+ adults, the kind of intensive training that would include study of space and place in relation to positive aging just does not exist for librarians. Finally, leadership is an issue. Space is turf, and reallocation of space assignments can be problematic internally. Library directors and administrators need to take the lead in reworking functional and physical priorities so that they reflect programmatic goals for midlife adults.

Beyond the practical and organizational challenges, there are other issues and questions that need to be answered before there is a clear model for the library as a 50+ place. Is it preferable to situate midlife adults in their own dedicated spaces, apart from young people, or to create spaces that are ageless and encourage intergenerational contact? What does a virtual space for midlife adults look like, and how can it reinforce the factors that promote healthy aging? Can we design library spaces for self-directed learning as well as social interaction? How can one space or even several spaces accommodate the diverse needs and interests of the multiple generations that make up the 50+ population?

Even in the face of these challenges and questions, given the extraordinary potential for libraries to become essential hubs for midlife adults, it is surprising to see how little investment there is in space development. A new life stage demands new approaches to space and place. It is not enough simply to relocate a reading group or health seminar to an unused corner of the reference area, expand large-print collections, purchase comfortable furniture, create a web page titled "50+," or hang a banner welcoming seniors. All of these may be appropriate in one or another community, but they do not reflect the realities of today's midlife adults. All too often the spaces that are developed to attract older adults end up reinforcing the stereotypes of aged persons as passive, infirm, and inactive. Baby boomers today are looking for action, challenge, and engagement.

Just as libraries across the country are redesigning early childhood areas to take advantage of new research on brain development and emerging literacy, and teen spaces to engage and empower adolescents as they mature, so they must start to redesign older adult areas on the basis of new knowledge of cognitive development and the factors that promote healthy aging. To fulfill their potential as 50+ places, libraries need to carry out a thoughtful process for allo-

cation of space and development of physical features that matches a vision for programs and services for midlife adults. That vision needs to be grounded in what is known about how to optimize aging, it needs to be reflected in staff attitudes and practices, and it needs to be reinforced through appropriate language and internal and external marketing.

Despite the obstacles to change, there are some efforts under way to rethink libraries as places and spaces that are conducive to positive aging. They are small in number, but they do reflect the beginning of awareness that programming alone does not create the 50+ place. Just as other aspects of 50+ library services are works in progress, so, too, is the 50+ place.

Notes

1. David E. Vance et al., "Mental Stimulation, Neural Plasticity, and Aging: Implications for Nursing Research and Practice," *Journal of Neuroscience Nursing* 40, no. 4 (2008): 241–49.
2. See, for example, Gene Cohen, *The Mature Mind: The Positive Power of the Aging Brain* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).
3. "Chicago Healthy Aging and Social Relations Study (CHASRS)," University of Chicago Department of Psychology, <http://psychology.uchicago.edu/people/faculty/cacioppo/CHASRS.shtml>.
4. Margie E. Lachman and Stefan Agrigoroaei, "Optimizing Health: A Life-Span Approach," in *Boomers and Beyond: Reconsidering the Role of the Library*, ed. Pauline Rothstein and Diantha D. Schull (Chicago, American Library Association, 2010).
5. R. Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You through the Day* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1989).
6. Richard Wolf, "When Retiring Means Giving Back," *USA Today*, March 29, 2011, www.usatoday.com/printedition/news/20110128/1arestoflife28_cv.art.htm.
7. Fengyan Tang, Choi EunHee, and Nancy Morrow-Howell, "Organizational Support and Volunteering Benefits for Older Adults," *Gerontologist* 50, no. 5 (2010): 603–12.
8. *Older People: Independence and Well-Being*, a report cosponsored by the Audit Commission and Better Government for Older People, Public Sector National Report, London, 2004, www.audit-commission.gov.uk/nationalstudies/health/socialcare/Pages/olderpeople.aspx.
9. Robert Martin, "Libraries and Learning," *Advances in Librarianship* 28:83–93.
10. Paul Nussbaum, quoted by Yamila El-Khayat of the Arizona Health Sciences Library in "Librarians Are True Doctors: Reflections on the Arizona Adult Services Summit,"