

Why Hire a Library Building Consultant?

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Most libraries hire consultants because there is no one on the governing body or library staff with extensive experience with library architecture from the owner's point of view.

One of the major problems with library design is that there are many players. Making sure that the library functions effectively and efficiently should always be the central consideration, but political and aesthetic issues sometimes take over. The job of the consultant is to make sure that the library building accomplishes what it is expected to do.

Hiring consultants who are experienced professional librarians with a wide range of experience with library buildings is important. Few people outside of librarians understand the daily working life of libraries, and librarians with wide experiences with library buildings have a better idea of what ideas work best—and which ones lead to trouble.

Getting things right the first time is vital, because there is usually no second chance. A library building can (and should) last for a century or more, and an inadequately conceived or designed building can be a burden for generations.

An architect is not a substitute for a library building consultant. No matter how much experience architects have with library construction projects, they are not librarians. They don't work in libraries, and they don't view libraries as librarians do. No matter how good architects are—and there are many, many excellent architectural firms with solid library experience—their priorities are not those of librarians. Someone in the project team needs to have a thorough understanding of library architecture from the library function point of view and be prepared to occasionally argue with the architects if aesthetics replace function.

Even if the board and staff have the necessary experience with library architecture, they may need an outsider who can say politically unpopular things. A consultant has the advantage of being able to deliver the bad news and then leave town, carrying the onus of blame.

Complementary Areas of Expertise

Library building consultants are typically either librarians or architects with experience in library design. There is considerable advantage to hiring a consultant who is a practicing librarian with years of experience, because the consultant's presence insures a greater range of viewpoints on the library planning team. If both the consultant and the architect are professional architects, there may be no one on the team with an extensive knowledge of library building design from the point of view of day-to-day library operations.

What should you expect from a library building consultant?

Programming

Someone needs to prepare a “building program” for the new or expanded library, and this is the responsibility of the consultant. A building program is an extremely detailed description of the various spaces the library needs to meet its long-term goals. The program describes each space in the library, including its contents, size, physical character, and relationship to other spaces.

It’s important that the program be written outside the box. It is not a list of remodeling ideas, but rather a list of spaces based directly on needs to be met and services to be offered. If the library is considering remodeling an existing building, the program provides a yardstick for measuring whether the project can be carried out successfully.

All building programs should be based on extensive meetings with library owners and librarians. Depending on the extent of prior studies, the programmer may also meet with user groups. The job of the programmer is not to stand on Olympian heights dictating contents, but rather to ask extremely detailed questions about desired services and functions, and to use this information to describe the sizes and types of spaces needed in the library.

A good program begins with services, moves from there to contents and spaces, and only then to building size.

One important function of building programs is to resolve ambiguity. As long as people are speaking in vague terms about their library building, they may not realize that agreement is absent in many areas. But once things are in print in detail, issues that need to be resolved become apparent. As Francis Bacon noted, “Truth emerges more readily from error than from confusion.”

Architects need programs, and if the library does not have a program when it hires an architect, the architect will begin work by programming. (If an architect attempts to develop a library building plan without a program, there is no guarantee that the spaces provided will correspond with the library’s needs.)

If an existing building is to be expanded, the program should include an extensive analysis of the structure from the point of view of library functions. This is important to the architect, because it provides a checklist from the point of view of experienced librarians of strengths to be retained and problems to be solved when the building is expanded.

Developing Plans

Library consultants should be prepared to stay with projects from their beginning until bids are let. As a member of the planning team (board, staff, architect and consultant) the consultant should be expected to help steer the project away from community or architectural ideas that have proved not to work in libraries.

Consultants are useful at both the beginning (schematic) and final (design development) stages of plan development.

At the start, consultants can help with broad spectrum concerns. Do the sizes and juxtapositions of the rooms match those in the written building program? Are there any major design ideas that are known to cause problems in libraries? Will the building be easy for users to understand? Will the building be easy to maintain? Dysfunctional design ideas need to be halted as soon as possible, before architects waste design time on them.

At the end of the design process, consultants can check for well-designed lighting systems, window arrangements, electrical outlets, etc.

A number of design ideas that are popular in other types of structures cause serious problems in libraries. Among these are skylights, atriums, courtyards, water features, non-acoustic ceilings, balconies, downlighting, and designer staircases.

Construction Documents

Constructing a library is different from constructing an automobile. Most library projects are unique, and there is no opportunity to build a trial library, evaluate it, modify the design, and then try again. There's only one chance to do it right.

In addition, buildings are extraordinarily complicated, and a good-sized library structure involves tens or hundreds of thousands of decisions by a number of individuals, including both architects and engineers. Even the finest architectural designs can reasonably be expected to have errors.

Consultants should be expected to take time for a full review of the construction documents before they are made available to bidders, helping in the process of seeking out mistakes. Any error caught and corrected at this point can easily save libraries many times their consultants' fees.

Punch Lists

At the end of projects, the designers and owners prepare lists of items that need to be corrected or completed before the contractors receive their final payments.

This is a critical time, because the owners have not yet paid the contractors the full amount of the contract. Once this retainage has been paid, owners lose a great deal of leverage, and getting contractors to return to finish minor items can be very difficult.

A library's architects and engineers will prepare punch lists, but they are not always as thorough as some libraries want. By the end of a project, the designers and builders are eager to move on to new jobs, and there's sometimes a resulting tendency to give punch lists short shrift.

Library building consultants can help evaluate completed projects, usually working with library staff. (Today's HVAC systems are extraordinarily complex, and as a result things are

sometimes not set in operation correctly. It's a good idea to hire an outside expert in the field to test out systems, including all electronic functions, to make sure that everything is operating correctly.)

Other Services

Depending on circumstances, library building consultants can lead public input sessions, explain library building planning to local groups, etc.

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