Case Study: The Watsonville Public Library

Submitted by Rena Dubin

I visited the Watsonville Public Library for the first time on June 29, 2017. Following are my impressions of the library, the results of interviews with several librarians, and how my findings might be relevant to our quest to create a wonderful downtown branch in Santa Cruz.

- **OUTSIDE**
  - Nothing at this branch screams "library" from the outside! Although I have driven on Main Street countless times, I had no idea the library existed at this location. My parents moved to Watsonville eight years ago, and, when babysitting, would have loved to take my kids there. I wish we had known this nice library existed.
    - Relevance:
      - People can only go to the library if they know where it is!
      - This raises particular red flags for me regarding the parking garage/library option. Changing the location would be confusing for sporadic patrons in any circumstance. However, I am now particularly concerned that a library on the ground floor of a parking garage will not be able to visually announce itself boldly to the public (while being aesthetically pleasing).
  - Initial doors were heavy and cumbersome to open. A children's librarian told me, "I always feel for the mom balancing her slowly-walking toddler, her baby in a stroller, and an armload of picture books."
    - Relevance:
      - This seems to be a perfect image as we consider various design ideas! It is not just about ADA compliance. How easily can an overburdened caregiver enter the building, return books, and get a young child to a welcoming and safe place?
- **LOBBY**
  - Very spacious! Curved lines, nice accent colors, well lit, and overall a very inviting space. The check in/out desk was obvious while also not the first thing one sees. The staff can monitor everyone coming in and out without being obtrusive, while a patron can get help or ask questions immediately upon entering. The staircase was large, pleasing and beckoning. Although the children's area was connected to the lobby, they were visually separated by the lobby's high ceilings and the lower ceilings and brighter lights in the children's area. Bathrooms were near the entrance. There was a "family bathroom" that needed a key. A librarian said to be careful about flooring issues by the water fountains, because their tile always gets slippery when water inevitably drips on it.

- - - Relevance:
      - When considering a remodel versus a teardown in the existing downtown location, one major issue for me is the lobby and entrance (as well as the structural and safety issues). Our existing entrance is a mess; it is unwelcoming and ugly, with odd things taking up the prime easy-access space. I would love to incorporate high ceilings, an easier entrance, and an unobtrusive help desk that nevertheless has good visibility. I am dubious this can be fixed without a serious remodel/partial teardown. And I love having bathrooms right at the entrance, or even better, on the city street, as was suggested!
  - The Friends room (closet) was around the corner of the lobby, completely unconnected, with ineffective signs pointing the way.
    - Relevance:
      - I do not like the Friends office and bookstore in the lobby, especially when it is closed with the ugly gate around it! The lobby's priority should be providing a welcoming atmosphere. On the other hand, if we do not purposely design a space for Friends, it could be shoved in a rarely-used back room like Watsonville. I am not sure how much floor space we want to dedicate Friends…definitely a topic to consider.
  - The only available seating in the lobby was part of the children's section. The furniture was particularly welcoming and brightly colored. However, the children's librarian said she had to constantly scoot adults, particularly homeless people, upstairs.
    - Relevance:
      - I liked that there was no place to sit in the lobby! It kept it welcoming, and I appreciated the lobby was a space designed for flow of exiting and entering versus hanging out. This was not a hotel lobby, but felt purposeful.
      - If the children's section is near the entrance, let's make sure cozy seating is not the bridge between the lobby and children's section!
- **FIRST FLOOR: CHILDREN'S SECTION**
  - The librarians all LOVED having the children's section downstairs. The proximity to the entrance makes it really easy for the aforementioned overburdened mom! Kids can run ahead and still be seen. The bright colors and welcoming atmosphere seemed nice for all patrons. The floor separation between children and teen/adults made for a safe atmosphere. It would be easy to tell at a glance if an adult was in the section inappropriately. Also, the kids could be louder without interrupting adults.
    - Relevance:
      - I am having trouble visualizing a good separation between children's area and adult area in the parking garage/library scenario on one large floor, particularly when we want to avoid the "Box Store" approach or one long room. Even if the sections are visibly separated, the noise can be

intense in one large space. (Hang out for an hour at Branciforte or Scotts Valley Libraries and hear how one child can interrupt the entire space!) Floor separation can help.

- o CON: The Storytime Room is gorgeous and a good idea, except—it doesn't work. The librarian confirmed my suspicions. There is no door, so kids escape into the larger children's area. The cozy bleachers are inviting – but for crawling or jumping, not for sitting and listening quietly. The librarian uses the common meeting room upstairs for storytime activities --not the Storytime Room!
    - ▪ Relevance:
        - • Flexible meeting rooms that can accommodate both young kids and adults are much more useful! Meeting rooms both upstairs and downstairs (or in the children's section and adult section) could help serve our community well.
- o CON: Computers downstairs are for kids only. They are in a nice space and are appreciated. However, parents have a difficult time using the computers. The upstairs computer lab works well for solo adults, but there is no place there for a noisy, impatient young child. The computers downstairs are reserved for kids, and enough kids use them to bump parents off the computers.
    - ▪ Relevance:
        - • We definitely want to be sure patrons can use the library for their tech needs. How should we accommodate parents who need a computer?

- **TEEN ROOM**
    - o The teen room was upstairs, next to a staffed reference desk. Librarians said it was a popular spot. There were teens using it when I was there! They had a mix of seating options – cozy chairs, tables, and computers. Yet the décor in the room didn't feel particularly interesting. It was just a room without noticeable accent walls or retro seating. I am pretty sure they had accessible charging stations.
        - ▪ Relevance:
            - • A well-loved safe place at the library for teens to hang out is my fantasy! However, it did seem like the room could get really noisy, which would filter throughout the rest of the adult section. Having the teen room next to the reference desk is a good idea, but then the librarians are always shushing the kids. It seems like it would be good to have a vision of the room – clubhouse versus studious library space – and design from there. Also, teens seem to care less about the aesthetics of the space to feel welcomed.

- **STUDY ROOMS, MEETING ROOM, AND CONFERENCE ROOM**
    - o The librarians gave mixed reviews about the study rooms, saying rooms 1, 2, and 3 are not soundproof, and rarely used. The study rooms on the other side are always used, being more soundproof and private. The Meeting Room capacity is 50, and is in

demand. There is also a conference room with a capacity of 12 that is well-used. A librarian said that people sleep these rooms, so they need to be patrolled frequently.

- Relevance:
  - Soundproofing is a must. Variously sized study, meeting, and conference rooms tucked into different corners seem like a better investment than a block of study rooms. Professional, conference-style, soundproof meeting spaces of various sizes will probably be used in our downtown branch.

- **IMPRESSIONS OF UPSTAIRS OVERALL**
  - The space was well lit, with lovely shelving and tables, and lots of curved lines. It was pretty, but had little soundproofing. There was a staffed Computer Lab room that was quiet, and an Agriculture History room with a door that closed that was for quiet study, with tables and chairs as the seating and huge glass windows for visibility from the outside. The back wall was filled with cozy chairs that were filled primarily with the transient population (according to two librarians). One librarian talked extensively about the chairs – her biggest regret about the library is that the fabric on the chairs is not washable. According to her, they smell, are stained, and difficult to clean. The back wall was not visible from the reference desks, and therefore would need to be patrolled to be seen. I was surprised at the amount of stuff the homeless were willing to carry/drag onto the elevator, down the stacks, to the far end of the library's back wall.
    - Relevance:
      - Good lighting is essential and wonderful. It seems like there is a tradeoff between visibility, soundproofing, and how much staff is needed. There are homeless people in our community who depend on the library, and we need to plan a design that incorporates their use. I'm not sure this is the best model, but it was interesting that the transient population seemed to congregate in a specific section farther away from the other folks using the library. Let's be sure to get chairs with washable fabric!

Thanks for reading!

Respectfully submitted,

Rena

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