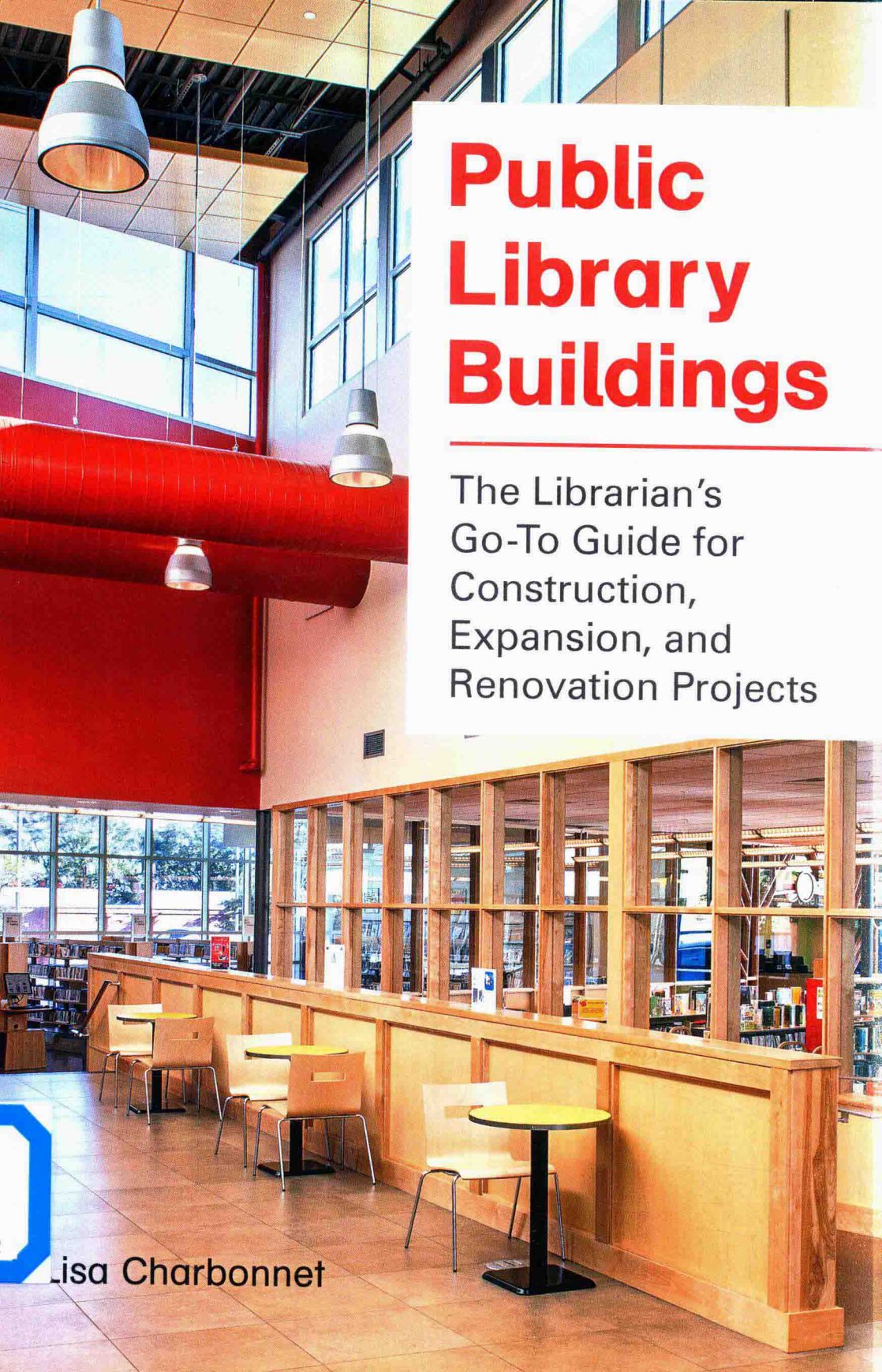

Public Library Buildings

The Librarian's Go-To Guide for Construction, Expansion, and Renovation Projects

Lisa Charbonnet

PUBLIC LIBRARY BUILDINGS

The Librarian's Go-To Guide for Construction, Expansion, and Renovation Projects

Lisa Charbonnet

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Public Library Buildings

For Clark, always, always, always

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1

Getting Started

So, there's a library building project in your future!

You feel pulled in lots of ways, excited about the possibilities, anxious to get it right, wondering about the budget, the team, and the time it will take. Some people will tell you to *think like an architect*, and others will start in on paint colors and furniture. *You* don't need to think like an architect, your architect does. You need to think like a librarian and your input is essential.

Public libraries are enormously diverse. They represent the full mosaic of American communities. Accordingly, no one can prescribe exactly what each public library building should look like. To further complicate the issue, public library construction projects can happen at wide intervals of both time and space. Few professionals, including architects, contractors, and city officials, have experience with a library's unique and complex requirements.

> *"Before we began the process of finding a new location for our library, I took some on-line university short classes on library design, etc. Plus, I read professional magazines, toured other libraries, and talked to librarians. I learned a lot, but, of course, I learned more by experience."*
>
> *Lois Bannister*
> *Director, Garland Smith Public Library*
> *Marlow, Oklahoma*

This book is addressed to you, the librarian, whatever is your title and however big is your library or its project. Its object is not to tell you how to build your library, but to lead you in a series of questions that will help you identify your needs and translate them effectively to stakeholders, funders, and the construction team.

It will bring up topics, in sequence, you will need to consider for a successful building project. If your project is relatively small and well-funded, you will be able to skip some chapters; if you're undertaking a complex renovation and expansion, you'll need everything. Each chapter contains tips and tricks for you to accept or reject. The chapters are peppered with examples of issues faced by other librarians.

The best use of this book is to become interactive with it. Scribble in the margins, stuff it in a pocket or on an iPad, talk back to it, pass the checklists around, and answer the questions in your own way.

Library construction is an iterative process, full of team meetings, discussions, and compromises with a wide range of participants. It is exciting, frustrating, and generative. Start in with flexibility and good humor and remember the goal is to provide everyone with a better, more efficient, more comfortable library.

DREAM

Go ahead! You have permission to dream: room for seating areas, lots of natural light, a complete technology upgrade, lower shelving and plenty of it, plumbing that works, space in the parking lot, a children's area, a teen room, a good roof, new carpet or even rubber flooring. Close your eyes and imagine how fantastic your library could be.

This is the stage for rosy pictures without constraints. This is the one stage where it costs you nothing, so let your imagination soar—from the prosaic to your fondest fantasies.

Doodle while you dream. Start small or start big, mix it all up on the back of an envelope or a scratch pad, this is for you. Take as long as you like, revisit it often; throw it all in a file for reference.

DEVELOPING YOUR VISION

Now open your eyes.

- Vision is developing a deep understanding of what your library is and where it can go to best serve the patrons of your community.
- Vision is a developed skill, one you can learn.
- Vision is the underpinning of every successful building project.

Vision is the recognition and development of your library's core identity. There are lots of models to choose from; some public libraries are so

closely identified with education that they call staff *instructors* and library programs *curricula*, others focus on the building itself and become icons of their cities, and still others are the *heart of the community* or the *third place*. Some libraries are *job training centers*, and some are *bridges* to information and entrepreneurship.

It is up to you, your staff, and the members of your community to determine who you are and who you want to become.

WHO ARE YOU?

Take the time you need to gather the answers to the questions below. Be comprehensive and honest; these data will give you the back-up data to convince others of the validity of your vision for your library. This is arguably the most important part of the book as all future decisions about the project will ultimately flow back to this section.

Community Statistics

Statistics are a good place to start. Go to the latest census,[1] www.census.gov, and drill down to your state, county, city, and community. If you straddle important boundaries, go down as far as block data to understand your whole community. You're looking for factors such as the percentage of families, children, and elderly. What languages are spoken in the home? How many ethnic groups are represented and in what numbers? Do people live and work in your community? Do they generally commute somewhere else? Are there many unemployed adults? What are community education levels? How about local incomes?

Check in with your local school district. You can often get good statistics online through your state or county education associations. Is education a major focus in your community? What are graduation rates? Are graduates heading for college or the job market? What percent of local children are eligible for free lunch programs?

Visit your municipal administration and take advantage of the City Planning Department, if you've got one. Is your area growing? Are there significant developments planned? If new roads are being built, where will they be? What are tax rates in your area? Is there a healthy commercial sector? Is the local tax rate relatively high or low?

Your State Highway Department is next. Traffic counts, at least for major roads and intersections, are largely available online and are usually collected at regular intervals. How do people move through your community? Are these patterns changing over time?

Finish up with a perusal of your county or parish Appraisal District. With a bit of data massaging, this should give you some comparative data on housing prices in your area. Are they growing? Stable? Are there pockets of real affluence or need? The Appraisal District can give you data over time,

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