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Cathleen Merenda
Director, Westbury Memorial Public Library, cathleenmerenda@westburylibrary.org

Gretchen Browne
Director, Plainview-Old Bethpage Public Library, gbrowne@poblib.org

Emily K. Wierzbowski
University at Albany, Department of Information Studies, May 2016 graduate, ewierzbowski@albany.edu

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On the Frontline: Repurposing Public Library Spaces

Author Information
Cathleen Merenda (cathleenmerenda@westburylibrary.org) is the Director, Westbury Memorial Public Library. Gretchen Browne (gbrowne@poblib.org) is the Director, Plainview-Old Bethpage Public Library. Emily K. Wierzbowski, (ewierzbowski@albany.edu) a May 2016 MSIS graduate of UAlbany’s Department of Information Studies, interviewed Altamont Free Library’s director Joe Burke in April 2016.

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Repurposing library spaces begins with understanding and knowing the local community and community needs. Assessing needs, looking into the future, and seeking creative solutions are activities described by Cathleen Merenda and Gretchen Browne in their co-authored article on their two Long Island libraries. In upstate New York, repurposing space took on a different significance for the Altamont Free Library, as the community worked together to adapt the former historic train station into a vibrant community library.

New York’s Long Island

As friends and directors of two public libraries on Long Island, the authors are always looking for creative ways to make their libraries better and to continue to serve the needs and interests of their communities. The communities each serves are demographically and economically distinctive but the goal is the same: repurposing library spaces to enhance the user experience and maintain the library as a meaningful contributor to the ever changing life and needs of the community.

Westbury Memorial Public Library

The Westbury Memorial Public Library serves a community of approximately 35,000. Two school districts are served by the Library: Carle Place, which is predominantly white and middle class; and Westbury, a school district that is 73% Latino, 26% African-American; 80% of students qualify for free lunch. The Library’s annual budget is $3,247,000.

The Westbury library staff and board support a “no barriers” philosophy of service particularly as it relates to technology. We believe the easier it is to use technology, the more it will be used. The Library’s mission statement requires the Library to “sustain a future-focus in response to technological change”. The staff leads the community toward emerging technologies by making them available at the Library as early as possible. The results are impressive; in 2015, in-house technology uses numbered 44,683.

The physical repurposing of library space was developed to support the no barriers philosophy. In the past, access was limited by the small number of available computers and by permission slips for children’s use. In December 2015, the Library had thirty-one public computers, nineteen public laptops and eighteen public iPads. The technology is supported by two full-time staff, one of whom has an MLIS, and five part-timers. In addition to supporting the technology itself, administration made a conscious decision that a staff person would be available at the technology desk to provide assistance to users whenever the Library is open. There are constant requests for help from the public. Even though internet skills are essential today, many users lack them.

As well as ease of physical access, the no barriers philosophy also means users are able to access the technology because they understand how to use it. In addition to having staff at the tech desk,
staff also offer group training workshops on devices and social media about once a month and
appointment-based, one-on-one assistance in Spanish and English. The tutorial sessions last about
an hour. In 2014, 485 individual sessions were provided.

The physical repurposing of Library space supporting barrier free access was inspired by my visit
to the Amsterdam Public Library in 2014. Among other wonderful features, this stunning, open,
light-filled library has desk height counters on every floor that wrap around a center space where
the escalators are located. These unsupervised counters and comfortable chairs are for drop-in
computer use.

When Westbury Memorial Public Library received a New York State grant for $25,000 from
Assemblyman Michael Montesano in 2014, we decided to use the funds to create a new space in
the Teen Spot where kids could use self-serve technology. The teens sit on high chairs at a counter
space with computers and keyboards. The counter takes up little room and, with seats facing
towards the wall, the kids have a sense of privacy, yet what they are viewing on the screens is
visible to passing staff. Registration for use is not required; teens simply sit down at one of the
seven computers and go on-line, after clicking on a simple agreement box that asks them to take
care of the equipment and respect their neighbors.

Teen users may stay on the computers for as long as they want and except for occasional
rambunctious behavior, we do not have to supervise them. Most of the teens who visit regularly
play Minecraft. There is little printing, but if needed, materials go to the tech room to pick up
printing or they can chose to use a computer in the tech room as an alternative space, if all the teen
computers are taken.

A similar physical renovation occurred at the Children’s Library, where the concept for the counter
with technology was introduced. This time the counter was low, and again, it saved a lot of space
by being against the wall, allowing better access to the book collections and the entire room. The
children give their first name to the staff when signing on to use a computer but staff do not ask
for a library card or permission form.

We were fortunate to have the services of Jayne Hirshman of A&G Designs, a talented Westbury
resident, whose company did the design and the carpentry work for both of these projects.

For adults, we are moving towards complete self-service use of computers. In addition to a staffed
technology room, patrons can now just sit down and access the internet from two places in the
Library. We plan to add two more self-serve computers in the quiet rooms in February and will
no longer sign up users in the tech room in the spring. We will continue to have a staff member at
the technology desk to provide help and to take fees for printing, scanning and faxing transactions,
which cost $.10 for black and white prints, $1 per page for faxing, and $1 per page for scanning.
We currently make around $1,800 per month in transactions at the technology service desk.

We just set up four new contemporary white tables and matching chairs for adults which will have
outlets on top to connect to individual technology. These replaced 24 year old traditional oak
library tables and chairs which we donated to the Westbury Islamic Center. We are in the process
of wiring our new tables and are excited to offer sixteen more places to sit in the Library where individual users are able to connect using their own devices or one of the Library’s loaner laptops.

Plainview-Old Bethpage Public Library

Just a few miles southeast of the Westbury Memorial Public Library, nestled in a community with a demographic differing from Westbury’s is the Plainview-Old Bethpage Public Library. The population is 90% white with the balance of Asian descent. Several redesign projects have reshaped the library over the course of time.

Plainview-Old Bethpage is a vibrant community whose 28,000 residents have long supported their library as the jewel of the community. They expect a high level of performance, including quality programming, access to the Internet and, of course, copious copies of new best sellers. They also rely on the library to serve as a central gathering place with resources allowing for individual and group work.

The building housing the library was constructed in 1964 and, over the years, has been redesigned to meet the community’s changing needs and to keep pace with the ever-quickening evolution of information delivery. Sited on a property that encompasses the equivalent of a full city block, the structure featured good lighting and plenty of floor space on a single level. It boasted room for 85,000 books, with stacks ninety-two inches high and twenty-one feet long. Staff offices, many of them constructed in rabbit warren-style, lined much of the perimeter. Created by an architect schooled in grocery store-style graphics, high signage encircled the interior.

The 1980s brought construction of a wing to house a growing print collection, adding space for twelve double-sided aisles of shelves, ninety-two inches high providing space for thousands of books in the addition. In 2005, a second major addition expanded the children’s department and opened a 237 seat auditorium.

Shortly after the 2005 renovation, I arrived as director to find that the community was pleased with the result. The auditorium’s shows, lectures and movies quickly filled to capacity, and still are. The children’s department, aptly referred to as the Family Center, bustled, and still does. However, much remained to be done.

Upon entering the building, customers were forced to go through a turnstile for an uncomfortable and awkward start to a library visit. Worse, the turnstile deterred patrons with walkers, wheelchairs and strollers from entering without staff assistance. The circulation desk was massive, five-feet-high all around and covering an area that measured roughly 25’ x 30’. From the circulation desk, the interior opened into a small Community Services office, although the door was always closed, and then into a large Media Department. Reference was relegated to the rear of the building and relatively inaccessible; most customers required a map to get there.

Clearly, it was time to make the library a more welcoming and accessible place.
The turnstile went. Next, recognizing that customers wanted to speak with staff the minute they entered the building about issues ranging from getting a library card to signing up for programs, I set out to transform the space from a transaction-based environment into a relationship-based environment.

A $140,000 plan was developed to accomplish this goal. An entrance was created that was both far more welcoming and far more practical. Its centerpiece involved replacing the imposing and intimidating circulation desk with a lower, accessible u-shaped information desk and a smaller, sleeker check-out/check-in desk. An equally accessible circulation desk stands several feet behind the info desk and is located just in front of the circulation office. Two self-checkout kiosks are also available, one sitting on the end of the circ desk. Copy machines, a fax machine, and the public OPAC access complete the new site.

Over the past few years, demand for quiet study space has grown exponentially. Students preparing for exams, researchers needing large enough work areas for writing papers and others needing places to tutor or collaborate on projects were seeking study space. The hue and cry was: “More study space please!” The Plainview-Old Bethpage Public Library was fortunate to have a large enough floor plan to meet these needs by reconfiguring its layout more economically and efficiently.

The Media Department occupied a large area –2,000 square feet! Patrons roamed wide aisles, browsing a huge collection of DVDs and books on CD, as well as video games. At one point, the collection also included VCR tapes and music cassettes. As popular as the department was, the shift toward discs and declining patronage due to changing viewing habits, made it the logical site for adding study space.

With guidance from an architect and assistance from KI, one of the most innovative and trusted office furniture manufacturers, the Media Department was demolished, relocated and rebuilt to be more compact while still meeting community needs. Redesigned to coordinate with the horseshoe-shaped information desk, and decorated with a bright color scheme, the redesigned Media Department features easy-to-use lower shelving units and houses the complete collection with room for growth.

The Media Department’s former area became home to two small quiet study rooms, one large study room, a meeting room suitable for groups of up to forty-five people and two staff offices. All the spaces were constructed using KI’s “Genius Walls,” a product providing semi-permanent walls complete with wiring and hardware.

The results have been astonishing. The quiet rooms are occupied from the moment the library opens until it closes each evening at 9 PM. A newly instituted online room reservation program, called D!BS enables patrons to book a room at particular times. To date, there have been more than 3,000 users. From July through December, 2015, 1,125 individual organizations booked the large meeting room – giving us confidence that the renovation has been what the community has been looking for!
New York’s Capital Region: The Altamont Free Library

When a library needs a new home, but constructing a new building is not in the budget, library management teams need to consider repurposing existing community structures. This was the case for the Altamont Free Library (AFL) in Altamont, New York. AFL has served the community for over 100 years and it has resided in a number of locations. After a seven year renovation period, the AFL is now housed in Altamont’s historic train station.

The building holds a special personal and historic significance for community members. A local Altamont author and patron of the library told the current AFL director, Joe Burke, stories about when the building was a working train station. The bay windows that overlook the train tracks are where the conductor’s office used to be. The structure was built in 1887 by the Delaware and Hudson Railroad, and since 1971, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Additions and repairs must include preserving the original architecture and color scheme of the site. All work on the building requires approval from the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation, adding red tape when considering changes that would affect the appearance and functionality of the building.

For the major renovation, much of the work was done by community volunteers. Now that the renovation is completed, it is not uncommon to hear about a patron’s contributions to the building. In fact, during my short interview, a woman proudly pointed out that she had varnished the shelves in front of the circulation desk. These personal and historic connections with the community help solidify that the library is theirs.

While the renovation costs have been paid off, the purchase of the building will take another seventeen years. Most of the one million dollars needed for the renovation was acquired through fundraising campaigns and New York State construction grants; and there is still more work to be done. It was not always easy as there were several obstacles along the way including a flood in the library’s temporary housing at Key Bank. Work was pushed up while the Altamont Masonic Lodge served as the library’s temporary home.
Since his arrival in January 2016, Mr. Burke has continued building repairs and improvements. He has also improved the energy efficiency of the building by installing ceiling fans and storm windows, and insulating the attic and basement. While this is a very lovely space, it is limited. There is no office space, and minimal programming and storage facilities. However, the library makes the best of this by utilizing movable shelving units, conducting weeding projects just prior to the annual book sale, and using the circulation desk as staff workstation.

Librarians like Joe Burke see great value in the physical space of the library as a third place. Burke notices a special significance in converting a train station into a library. He explained to me the train station can be seen as an “architectural metaphor” or “symbol of connectivity.” When the building was used for its original purpose, people went there to explore, to meet, to make connections, and Burke sees these activities as directly related to the activities of a public library. The monthly AFL Potluck is a good example of how the library invites community members to further explore, meet, and connect.

*Photos of the Altamont train station as it is adapted to house the Altamont Free Library*