Interior Decorating Offers a Way to Connect with Patrons

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JOHN H. SANDY

According to popular belief, Henry Ford, when asked about paint choices for new Model T cars, replied, “Customers can have the Model T in any color—so long as it’s black.” Fortunately, Mr. Ford does not speak for today’s librarians who are trying, with enthusiasm, to create attractive library interiors.

Interior decorating may seem a formidable task, since legacy operations and facilities, often from another era, appear to limit what is possible. When creative minds are brought to bear, and with careful planning, design, and execution, extraordinary results can be achieved, even with low to moderate budgets.

Why should libraries care about interior decorating? First, patrons respond to the surroundings they encounter, either favorably or not so favorably. It is well-known in commerce that customer satisfaction brings people in and contributes to repeat business. Astute librarians understand that the “look and feel” of library spaces may be as important as functionality and performance.

A related notion is the degree to which patrons bond with libraries. This is extremely important, since patrons will likely visit libraries more frequently and engage in greater intellectual activity if the atmosphere is conducive to study and contemplation. Further, patrons may experience better progress in their chosen endeavor.

Less understood is the ways interior decorating affects staff-patron interactions. Still, there is ample anecdotal evidence to suggest that staff and patrons mutually benefit when library interiors are attractive. When a positive ambiance is felt, staff and patrons may engage one another more often and in more fruitful ways.

Taken together, these and other issues are driving librarians to fashion and embrace new looks in their libraries. This is a major insight drawn from a 2007 nationwide survey of sixty American public and academic libraries conducted by the author. The results of the survey show that varying approaches are used in interior decorating and what is being done in specific libraries.

Foremost, interior decorating is seen as a way to connect with patrons. There is “more emphasis on meeting needs of students,” noted Bill Hair, Director of Baylor University Libraries. Changes are in the wind in West Texas too. “We have completely re-engineered our library to make it more open and inviting,” says Robert Stakes, Interim Director, University of Texas at El Paso.

Many libraries use artwork to enhance the aesthetics of interior spaces. At Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, “art is on loan from the museum and framed prints of historic photos are hung throughout the building,” says Diane Ruess, associate professor, and self-designated interior decorator. A rather creative way of acquiring artwork is underway at Boise Public Library. Kevin Booe, the library’s Director, is generating a good deal of interest with a rotating public art exhibit wall.

People love plants, but are plants compatible with the atmosphere libraries are striving for? When asked about plants, 50 percent of public libraries reported acquiring plants, either live or artificial, in the past five years, while 23 percent of academic libraries acquired plants over the same period. With low maintenance but much beauty, the Norfolk Island Pine is a popular choice in libraries.

Robert Resnik, co-director, Fletcher Free Library, in Burlington, Vermont uses ingenuity to stretch the budget for interior decorating: “We grow them [plants] ourselves,” said Resnik. Libraries find that plants offer an easy and inexpensive way to attract the attention and admiration of library patrons.

Interesting paint schemes are another way to entice patrons. Neutral colors often found in libraries may not create the best possible environment. Missouri State engages visitors with a most interesting palette: “Navaho white with accent walls in sunshine yellow, periwinkle,
or royal purple" spices up spaces, reports Karen Horny, Dean of Library Services.

Still, upgrades for more common furnishings remain important. Both public and academic libraries have consistently added new and improved study carrels and workstations, according to survey findings. Similarly, several libraries purchased new soft seating. A few public libraries have upgraded light fixtures or window treatments as well. Interestingly, a large number of libraries have achieved better ambiance by simply reconfiguring furnishings.

With technology taking more dollars from budgets, can libraries find money for interior decorating, especially for quality and innovative furnishings? Yes, many can. For example, the Missouri State University Library recently purchased maple study tables, rocking style study chairs, and electrically controlled shades. And readers at Thomas Branigan Memorial Library in Las Cruces, New Mexico, easily find the new books shelved on modern Slatwall displays.

At the Baylor University Libraries, interior decorating expenditures have averaged, on an annual basis, a respectable sum of about $48 thousand over the past five years. This shows that a nice décor is within reach of all. Clearly libraries are able to balance competing needs for scarce library dollars.

Integrating aesthetics and function is always a challenge in libraries, but careful thought can make it work. At the University of Alaska, "furniture is arranged by function in open areas, and carpet color creates separate spaces," says Ruess. At Missouri State, terrazzo tile in the lobby and entry areas beckons patrons to interior spaces.

While libraries as a group are actively engaged with interior decorating, some libraries report only minimal or no progress. A librarian at a major academic library in the Northwest noted that her library's approach to interior decorating is "haphazard." Four libraries (three academic and one public) indicated that no interior decorating has been done in the past five years.

Still, most librarians find positive outcomes, even in modest actions: "We are located in a mostly rural area of Southeastern Ohio that is not economically well-to-do. Our approach for the past decade has been to keep our buildings and furnishings attractive," said Sondra Plymire, Director of Libraries, Muskingum County Library System, Zanesville, Ohio.

Even as libraries place more emphasis on interior decorating, utility is not overlooked. This common sense approach to interior decorating resonates with Ed Sheary, Library Director at Asheville-Buncombe Library System in North Carolina. The Asheville-Buncombe Library aims for "simple, low maintenance, and durable," said Sheary.

What interior decorating activities did your library complete in the past five (5) years?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Academic libraries (n=15)</th>
<th>Public libraries (n=16)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Embellish spaces with accessories</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upgrade light fixtures or window treatments</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve aesthetics by rearranging furnishings</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Install high-end flooring</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upgrade tables, chairs, carrels</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase plants, live or artificial</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquire sculpture or decorative objects</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase soft seating</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paint walls in stylish colors</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquire artwork or documents</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data from a 2007 national survey of interior decorating in academic and public libraries, conducted by John Sandy.
Finding help with interior decorating projects is a challenge for libraries. Funds may not be available to hire professional interior decorators. And typically in-house staff lack talent and flair for interior decorating. Even so, some libraries can and do draw on their own personnel for interior decorating, with good results. At Thomas Branigan Memorial Library in Las Cruces, "staff have accomplished all decorating efforts without the services of a formal decorator," says Lori Grumet, Public Services Director. In other libraries, administrators enlist the expertise of professional interior decorators, either from other departments or from local interior decorating consultants.

As libraries become more user-centered, the aesthetics of interiors is becoming a standard for measuring success. While books and digital resources are the core of library services, the ambiance of the library environment is the mortar which melds library content and patron behaviors. In the future, more libraries may pursue interior decorating as a strategic enterprise, worthy of the same attention given to information services.

**Bibliography**


Note: The table on “interior decorating activities” along with selected text supporting the table, will be reprinted in a fall 2008 issue *Library Journal*. 