Is there a place in your community:
• where residents of all ages and incomes visit and enjoy spending their time?
• where people go to hear interesting speakers discuss new ideas, books, travel, and a broad range of topics?
• where comprehensive databases are available free of charge?
• where you can get help when applying for a job?
• where you can stop by and take home a book, CD, or DVD at virtually no cost?

That’s also a place:
• that’s “owned” by everyone in the community?
• and can be counted on, day after day, to draw people downtown or to main street?

In a growing number of cities and towns, there’s one answer to all these questions: the public library.

ANCHORS FOR OUR CITIES & TOWNS

Dramatic new or renovated libraries have become cornerstones of downtown in dozens of cities, including Denver, San Antonio, Des Moines, Indianapolis, and Salt Lake City, to name a few.

Noted architect and writer Witold Rybczynski offers an online slide show titled, “How do you build a public library in the age of Google?” His main point: libraries are far from dead in today’s Internet age – in fact, they’re making a comeback as key anchors in our downtowns. Indeed, they’re bringing us full circle to the “end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, when cities such as Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, and Chicago built ambitious public libraries.”

It’s important to recognize, however, that it’s not just big cities that benefit from libraries. In fact, smaller cities and towns may have even more to gain from having a thriving library as they don’t have the range of community gathering places that larger cities often have.

Reporter Annie Stamper writes that: “No more just a place to find books, today’s library is a place that extends far beyond its physical walls with the addition of digital information and access. Particularly in small towns, the library is often the hub of the community, providing a place for residents to meet, as well as to learn.”

Libraries, like city halls and post offices, are key to strong communities. Ed McMahon, a senior fellow at the Urban Land Institute, has pointed out that “public buildings and spaces create identity and a sense of place. They give communities something to remember and admire. The challenge facing public architecture is to provide every generation with structures that link them with their past, fill them with pride, and reinforce their sense of belonging.”

Keeping libraries in the center of town, and having them reflect high standards of design, is a challenge a growing number of communities are successfully meeting.

Hudson’s Star Attraction

I stopped in Hudson, Ohio, this April as part of my “Circle The USA” trip to learn about their library. Hudson is a small city (population 22,439), midway between Cleveland and Akron. It has elements of both a suburb and a small town. In the center of Hudson is its historic Main Street business district, home to the city’s library.

Opened in 2005, the library is housed in a stately brick building, with functional but very attractively-designed interior spaces. The focal point of the library is its rotunda, proof that the design of libraries today can match that of the classic Carnegie library buildings of a century ago.

New libraries tend to need considerably more space than their earlier counterparts. That’s the case in Hudson, where the new library building (at 50,000 square feet) is much bigger than

1 Available online at: www.slate.com/id/2184927/
3 From “Public Buildings Should Set the Standard” (PCJ #41, Winter 2001); available to order & download at: www.plannersweb.com/wfiles/w206.html

“THERE IS NOT SUCH A CRADLE OF DEMOCRACY UPON THE EARTH AS THE FREE PUBLIC LIBRARY, THIS REPUBLIC OF LETTERS, WHERE NEITHER RANK, OFFICE, NOR WEALTH RECEIVES THE SLIGHTEST CONSIDERATION.”
– Andrew Carnegie
the old building (at 17,000 square feet).

At first blush, this seems counterintuitive. Why in today's Internet and digital age would libraries need to be larger? More importantly, why do they seem in even greater demand?

I asked Assistant Director Margie Smith what draws people to the Hudson library. "It's become the cultural, entertainment, and social hub of Hudson," she replied. "The library programs a lot of readings, there are musical performances every week, and we also have meeting rooms."

The library also provides over 50 public computer terminals, access to state and local databases, and a collection of more than 7,000 DVDs. There's also a coffee shop to hang out in, and an outdoor patio. You can even borrow laptops from the library, and use them anywhere in the building or on the patio. What's more, the Hudson library doesn't close till 9 pm, Monday through Thursday, and is open a total of 69 hours each week, making it even more accessible.

For planners, however, I want to touch on what may be the most interesting aspect of the Hudson library: its location. It is part of an expansion of Hudson's Main Street district.

Indeed, you could say the library is Main Street's star attraction. As Hudson City Planner Mark Richardson told me, "you can't just rely on retail in downtown expansion, you need an activity center like a library." "The library," Richardson continued, "fulfills its role as the anchor by creating opportunities for multi-stop trips downtown."

The Main Street extension (called First & Main) consists of a mix of retail, office, and housing. The City has architectural design standards for the area. As Richardson notes, "the idea was for it to be a natural extension, not a replication, of Main Street." The streets are laid out in a grid, connecting with the old village.

From Richardson's perspective as a planner, having the library downtown is also cost-effective. As he explains, "the library's location downtown has helped facilitate numerous partnerships and collaborations with the merchants, the public, private, and parochial schools; and the City of Hudson because they are all located in close proximity ... these collaborations have allowed the library to stretch its tax dollars and, at the same time, more effectively serve the needs of Hudson."

**The Economic Benefits of Libraries**

As is the case in Hudson, libraries can bring substantial benefits to downtowns and main street districts. Planning consultant Robert Gibbs has observed that “a typical public library draws 500 to 1,500 people a day, that’s close to the draw of a small department store.”

The residents of Hudson have decided that the library is a key service they want for their community. The numbers attest to this, as there are more than 23,000 registered library users, who checked out 736,000 items last year. The library counted more than 700,000 visits, an average of well over 2,000 every day it was open.

Many cities and towns across America are still blessed by what was perhaps the greatest philanthropic legacy this country ever received: Andrew Carnegie's grants program to help fund the construction of libraries in communities large and small.

From 1896 to 1925 Carnegie provided grants for the construction of 1,681 libraries in 49 states (plus 156 in Canada) – only Rhode Island was somehow left out! About 70 percent of the Carnegie libraries were built in small towns with fewer than 10,000 people – with the first of the typical Carnegie-funded libraries being constructed in Fairfield, Iowa.

Invariably, a Carnegie library was a well-designed building, often a local landmark in the center of town. Fortunately, most of the Carnegie libraries are still standing, many remaining in active use as local libraries, treasured by generations of residents.

In my hometown of Burlington, Vermont, that's certainly the case – the Fletcher Free Library was built with a $50,000 gift from Andrew Carnegie in 1904.
it less of a shopping center and more of a
town center.”

Seattle is another city that has gained
substantial economic benefits from its
new downtown library, opened in 2004.
An economic assessment prepared for
the City found that “the Library is associ-
ated with $16 million in net new spend-
ing in Seattle in its first year of operations
– equal to $80 million for 5 years,” and
that “nearby businesses report increases
in spending associated with Library vis-
itors.” As a result, “the increased number
of Library visitors contributes to Down-
town vitality and vibrancy, making
Downtown a more attractive residential
and commercial market.”

As Brian Murphy of the Seattle-based
Berk & Associates, which prepared the
economic assessment, told me, “the
library has become an important part of
a network of attractions in Seattle.” In
part, this is because of the library’s dra-
matic design. Its location close to down-
town residential neighborhoods and the
city’s retail core is also a big plus, he
added.

Perhaps more surprising is another
major draw that Murphy pointed to, the
Seattle library’s extensive genealogical
resources, which attract visitors from a
wide area. Indeed, the library has more
than 40,000 items in its collection, and
three full-time genealogy reference
librarians to provide assistance.

“A Harbor You Can Sail Into”

Those are the words that Stephen
Coronella used to describe the role of the
Putney, Vermont, public library. For
Coronella, who’s the librarian in this
small Vermont town (population 2,600),
a good library works a lot like a harbor. It
provides a place where people can dock
themselves for a while, socialize with oth-
ers, and feel some comfort and security.

When I met with Coronella, he
explained that over the years libraries
have become more multi-faceted. They’re
no longer just places to read and take out
books (though that’s still a key function).
Increasingly, libraries are providing a
broader range of services, from access to
research databases, to loaning videos and
CDs, to providing Internet access, to
offering space for lectures and public
meetings.

The Putney library attracts one hun-
dred or more people on a daily basis, and
forty or fifty more often show up for
evening programs. You’ll find people of
all ages, incomes, and backgrounds using
the Putney library. Its seven public access
computers are very popular, and offer a
valuable service in this rural community
where residential broadband service is
limited. 

The library’s beautiful new building is
located within walking distance of the
town center (less than half-a-mile away)
and next to a co-op market and senior
housing. The new building was made
possible in part from a generous donor,
but also through extensive fund-raising
in the Putney community.

The importance of libraries like Put-
ney’s to village and town centers was
underscored in a public forum sponsored
by the Windham Regional Commission
(the WRC’s service area includes Putney,
Brattleboro, and 25 other small towns in
southeastern Vermont). As Kendall Gif-
ford, a planner with the WRC, told me, it
“opened up perceptions of what libraries
have to offer.”

One by-product of the forum was the
formation of a task force to develop rec-
ommendations for strengthening local
libraries within the region. The task
force’s report, The New Heart of the Old
Village Center: The Role of the Library in
Community Development, includes a
series of recommendations centered on
three goals: to achieve universal access to
library services; to assure adequate fund-
ing for libraries; and to use libraries to
strengthen village centers.

Susan McMahon, another planner
with the WRC, has been struck by how
often people have mentioned the value of
their libraries “as community places,
where you can see your neighbors,” and
by the importance that seniors, in partic-
ular, place on having a library nearby.

One problem facing local libraries in
Vermont – and many other states – is the

lack of state financial support. This puts the burden on cities and towns to provide funding from their municipal budget. Not surprisingly, this can be a major hurdle, especially in communities with limited resources. "What’s the State of Your Library?"

While private organizations like the Freeman Foundation (in Vermont) and the Gates Foundation (nationwide) have stepped up to provide financial support, this is not a long-term solution. Recognizing this, the Windham Regional Commission task force report points out the importance of educating legislators, community leaders, and residents about libraries’ funding needs “in the context of all the positive community and economic benefits” they bring.

From a national perspective, why shouldn’t libraries be more highly valued? In 2006, the most recent year for which data is available, there were some 1.4 billion visits to the nation’s 9,208 public libraries.*

To put library visits in perspective, consider that in 2007 the attendance at major league baseball games was 81 million and NFL football, 22 million – add in NCAA men’s and women’s basketball (43 million) and football (49 million) and the total is less than 15 percent the number of visits to public libraries.7 Yet libraries may well be the single most important civic institution in America today. As scholar Vartan Gregorian has noted, “Across America we are coming to realize the library’s unsurpassed importance as a civic institution … In our democratic society, the library stands for hope, for learning, for progress, for literacy, for self-improvement and for civic engagement. The library is a symbol of opportunity, citizenship, equality, freedom of speech and freedom of thought, and hence, is a symbol for democracy itself. It is a critical component in the free exchange of information, which is at the heart of our democracy.”*

4 Quoted by journalist Phil Langdon in “Public Buildings Keep Town Centers Alive” (PCJ #49, Winter 2003), available to order & download at: www.plannersweb.com/wfiles/wi144.html.


7 Sports attendance data from The 2009 Statistical Abstract (U.S. Bureau of the Census), Tables 1204/1205. Unfortunately, the Statistical Abstract does not include attendance for all sports, but you get the picture.
Libraries
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Moab is located in a remote, but spectacu-
larly beautiful, corner of Utah, and is home to Arches National Park, a thriving
recreational industry, and residents who
love the outdoors.* But it is also home to
a fine new county library, at 15,000
square feet, triple the size of its former
location.

The library itself is a delightful place.
When I stepped inside, it was a beehive
of activity, with people of all ages
engrossed in reading and, yes, in using
the Internet.

In fact, Internet use has been boom-
ing. When I followed up with Library
Director Carrie Valdes this May, she told
me that the number of online sessions
last year exceeded 93,000, up from
75,000 in 2007. The library building is
also wireless. In part, the growth in Inter-
net use owes to the fact that anything
faster than dial-up service is very costly
in Moab. Valdes also believes that the
economic downturn has led to increased
use, especially as more people are look-
ing to access online job search services.

The Grand County library is part of a
small complex of public buildings, mak-
ing it even more convenient for area resi-
dents. Right next door are the municipal
offices, in a recently rehabbed former ele-
mentary school building.

The Library Board saw the need to
purchase the property the library is now
located on several years ago. It wanted to “lock in”
a downtown site for use when the time came for
expansion (important

Views of the Grand County
library in Moab, Utah.

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Internet Access

One of the essentials of
being informed today is hav-
ing Internet access. That’s still a problem
in many rural areas, and for low-income
households. Public libraries are a critically
important resource in terms of broad-
ening the availability of this access.

A nationwide survey conducted last
year by the Florida State University’s
Information Institute focused on the
Internet and libraries. Two of the most
striking findings: 72.5 percent of
libraries reported that they are the only
provider of free public computer and
Internet access in their community, while
98.9 percent of public libraries indicated
that they offer Internet access.* Moreover,
according to the Institute of Museum
& Library Service, in 2006 a total of
196,000 Internet computers were avail-
able in America’s public libraries (3.4 per
5,000 people).**

Another sign of the times: the rapid
increase in the number of libraries offer-
ing wireless access – an increase from
54 to 66 percent of libraries in just the
past year.*** Wireless access is of value
not just to residents, but to tourists and
business travelers when they visit a com-
munity.

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* Public Libraries and the Internet 2008: Study
Results and Findings.
** Public Libraries Survey Fiscal Year 2006 (Insti-
tute for Museum & Library Services, Dec. 2008),
p. 5.
*** Id. Public Libraries and the Internet …
a 6.2-acre redevelopment that also includes 30,000 square feet of retail, a 180-unit condominium, and a parking garage. This mix of complementary uses has created a hub of activity in the heart of this suburban city of 58,000.11

In putting together the project, the library served as the traffic anchor, “much like a large retailer would” explained Stephen Friedman of S.B. Friedman & Co. His firm, which specializes in advising communities on public/private partnerships, worked with the City of Des Plaines on the redevelopment. Having a high quality library, Friedman adds, is also an important part of being a “full service” community, something that suburbs are increasingly focusing on as they seek to create a high quality of life for residents.

Another interesting point that Friedman makes is the importance of libraries in middle-income communities like Des Plaines. “People can’t always afford Barnes & Noble or Borders,” he notes, but many middle-income individuals are highly educated, “so the library becomes a critical public service for them.”

In St. Paul, Minnesota, the 31,000-square foot Rondo Community Outreach library is on the ground floor of a new building that includes three floors of mixed-income housing, plus a floor of parking immediately above the library (serving the apartments) and underground parking below (for library patrons).

The project grew out of a desire by the City and neighborhood to redevelop what had been the site of an adult entertainment theater – a focal point of community anger – demolished after the City acquired the property. The idea of a mixed-use building emerged from a conjunction of interests: the City’s goal of providing more affordable housing and the fact that the existing neighborhood public library had outgrown its building.12

According to Alice Neve, Supervisor of the Rondo Area Libraries, having the library in the same building as the housing provided some significant economies of scale, allowing for more space than if the library had been built as a standalone building. Families living in the apartments above, Neve notes, are also (not surprisingly) frequent visitors to the library.

A HOME FOR ALL OF THE COMMUNITY

Libraries provide something increasingly scarce in our cities and towns, what Brattleboro, Vermont, library director Jerry Carbone described to me as “neutral public space.”

Carbone explained that Brattleboro's Brooks Memorial Library, in the heart of downtown, makes its community room available at no charge to local organizations three evenings every week. The fact that it is public space, Carbone notes, makes it a more comfortable meeting place for some than a church basement or a business office meeting room – even though these private spaces are typically made available for community meetings in a spirit of good will.

This message was reinforced in a conversation I had with David Lankes, Director of the Information Institute at Syracuse University. As Lankes observed, libraries are in a pivotal role because “there are very few civic organizations left today” that can provide a space accessible to everyone in the community.

But for Lankes, the role of today’s library goes beyond providing community space. Libraries, he argues, should also be actively seeking ways of “enriching and enhancing” issues people are most interested in.

To cite one example, Lankes told me how in several cities, librarians have developed training sessions – open to all – covering the basics of setting up a new business, and putting together a business plan. Along the same lines, some libraries are teaming up with local community development agencies to provide job counseling centers. This level of

11 The City of Des Plaines even offers a video tour of the library, accessible from their home page: www.desplaines.org/.
12 For more on the Rondo library: www.stpaul.lib.mn.us/locations/ rondo_about.html.
engagement goes well beyond the “traditional” role of just providing books about how to set up a business or find a job.13

Another valuable role that libraries play is in integrating immigrants and other newcomers into our communities. As national columnist Neil Peirce reports: “In immigrant-heavy suburbs of Washington, D.C., many public libraries have recast themselves as welcome centers. Some checkout desks have signs in Korean, Chinese, Spanish and Vietnamese. A recent immigrant from the Dominican Republic said: ‘I come to the library almost every day. And two days a week I follow the conversation classes. We have the opportunity not only to improve our English but to get new friends from all over the world.’”14

At the other end of the country, Seattle’s Kent Kammerer points out that “Seniors now flood the libraries for many reasons including taking computer classes and attending special programs. Young people find willing, friendly help at the library … and yes, though, the library wasn’t designed to be a hygiene center or daytime shelter, some homeless people find the library the most welcoming place to spend their days.”15

There’s been a “sea change” in the past five to ten years in the role libraries are playing in communities, says Sari Feldman, Director of the Cuyahoga County, Ohio, Library, which operates 28 branches in Cleveland’s suburbs. Feldman, who is also President-elect of the Public Library Association, told me that “libraries have become vibrant centers of community interaction,” with librarians working more closely with community groups and businesses. In Cuyahoga County; notes Feldman, “the library does extensive focus groups, polling, and market research” to better learn what the community wants.

Libraries have been especially proving their worth during the current recession. As Feldman explains, “we’re clearly the place where people are coming for job information, for preparing online job applications, and for basic financial literacy … and we provide them support in doing this.”

**SUMMING UP:**

The 21st century library has arrived. Its mission goes far beyond loaning out books and providing reference materials. In fact, in a growing number of cities and towns, the library has become the hub of the community, drawing large numbers of new users. This is happening because libraries are providing programs, meeting space, computer access, and resources that are responding to a broader array of community needs.

Moreover, when libraries are located in downtown, village, or neighborhood centers, there’s also a special synergy at work. Libraries generate increased business for local merchants, while those shopping or working downtown visit the library as part of their day.

Libraries and community. They’re really inseparable. ◆

Wayne Senville is Editor of the Planning Commissioners Journal. His previous articles and reports for the PCJ include “Downtown Futures” (PCJ #69, Winter 2008); “Crossing America” (PCJ #68, Fall 2007); “Bright Ideas” (PCJ #61, Winter 2006); and “Preservation Takes Center Stage” (PCJ #52, Fall 2003).

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13 To learn about other creative ways in which libraries can engage with their community, see the Project for Public Spaces’ “Libraries That Matter,” at: www.pps.org/info/newsletter/april2007/libraries_that_matter; and Making Cities Stronger: Public Library Contributions to Local Economic Development (cited in footnote 10).


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Stormwater Management Resources


The EPA’s Office of Policy, Economics, and Innovation Smart Growth Programs has additional resources on stormwater and development.

The Vermont Stream Geomorphic Assessment from the state’s Agency of Natural Resources provides a comprehensive glossary of terms for those new to the vocabulary of stormwater.

Projects highlighted in Lynne Richards’ article include:
The Rain to Recreation Program, a regional watershed approach to address stormwater quantity and quality in Lenexa, Kansas. Goals of the program are to reduce flooding, protect water quality and natural habitat, and to provide recreational and educational opportunities. See also PCJ Editor Wayne Senville’s report on this program during his visit to Lenexa in June 2007.

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