

A photograph of a modern library interior. The floor is covered in a blue carpet with a subtle geometric pattern. In the foreground, there are three large, bright yellow cylindrical ottomans. In the middle ground, a man is sitting in a blue and white ergonomic chair, working on a laptop. To his left, a woman is sitting at a small white table, reading a book. The background features a glass wall and a green modular sofa. The overall atmosphere is bright and contemporary.

# REPURPOSE WITH A

# PURPOSE

## Converting nonlibrary spaces into public libraries

By Fred Schlipf and  
John A. Moorman

# DOOSE

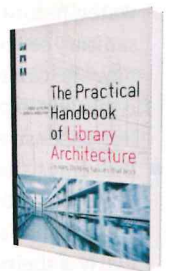
**W**hen a community needs a new library building, people frequently suggest converting existing—usually vacant—structures into a library. Converting nonlibrary spaces into libraries has much in common with remodeling and expanding existing libraries, but it's a far different undertaking.

When possible conversions loom on the horizon, libraries must be prepared. In all conversion situations, one of the major problems involves the building shaping the library rather than the library shaping the building. Many spaces may lack the basic functional needs of libraries, such as ceilings high enough for reflected uplighting, sufficient power supplies, workable configurations of spaces, desirable natural light, good sight lines, sufficient floor strength, and flexibility of design. If too many of the basic needs are compromised, the result is at best dysfunction and at worst an amazing waste of money.

## Begin with a plan

Always start by preparing a building program to evaluate possible conversions. If you don't have one, people will start pointing out what interesting features could be provided in certain existing structures. By and large, these will be features you don't need. Unless you have a lot of experience with library building construction, hire a building consultant to write your program—an experienced professional librarian with a degree accredited by the American Library Association and not an architect.

Because there are many issues in library planning in addition to space needs, building programs need to be detailed, with



This is an excerpt from *The Practical Handbook of Library Architecture: Creating Building Spaces That Work* by Fred Schlipf and John A. Moorman (ALA Editions, 2018).

Photo: Dan Schwalm/HDRI, Inc.

Inside the Do Space in Omaha, Nebraska, a former bookstore.

information on required floor loading, accessibility, lighting, acoustics, furnishings, shelving, floor coverings, electrical supplies, sight lines, exit control, security, flexibility, and other areas. Programs should always be written without regard to available spaces, so that they can be used as measuring sticks to test the feasibility of using a proposed space. There will inevitably be compromises, but starting with the ideal program helps everyone become aware of what these compromises are.

### Reasons to choose conversion

There are good and bad reasons for converting existing spaces to libraries.

#### THE GOOD

- **Location.** Sometimes the best locations already have buildings on them that can be reused.
- **Parking.** If a building has a parking lot in good repair, the library is spared the cost of constructing a new one.
- **Utility hookups.** The cost of bringing water, natural gas, electric power, data, sanitary sewers, and storm sewers to a new site can be very high. If everything is already in place, conversions will be less expensive.
- **Buildings that are in good shape and fairly easy to convert.** The best examples are modern big-box stores, particularly if their mechanical, electrical,

and plumbing (MEP) systems are in good condition.

- **Modern buildings available for conversion.** A building constructed after about 1980 is likely to be accessible to users with disabilities and not suffer from asbestos, lead paint, or other problems that will be extremely expensive to overcome.

#### THE BAD

- **Saving money.** Few people have any concept of how much it costs to convert an old building to a library. Library owners need to remind stakeholders that almost all conversions will involve constructing new restrooms, replacing existing lighting, adding electrical outlets, upgrading or replacing HVAC systems, providing new plumbing in staff work areas and lunchrooms, removing unwanted partitions, adding windows, improving insulation, and so on.
- **Some conversions may come with unacceptable limitations.** The previous owners of a building must have no rights of any kind whatsoever over the subsequent use of the property. The library needs full title to the building, including the site, allowing it to make any changes it wants and to sell off the building and site and move on at any time it wants. Any proposed limitations must be deal killers.

### Buildings to consider

**Big-box stores.** Of all the projects for converting nonlibrary buildings to libraries, conversions of big-box stores are among the most successful. Modern big-box stores have a number of advantages:

- grade-level entries
- single floors, eliminating the need for elevators and staircases and reducing the number of staff required for supervision
- concrete slab-on-grade floors that can carry the weight of books
- high ceilings, making lighting far easier
- large parking lots
- utilities connected. Most big-box stores will have electric power, natural gas, water, sanitary sewer, storm sewer, and data connections already in place.
- modern wiring

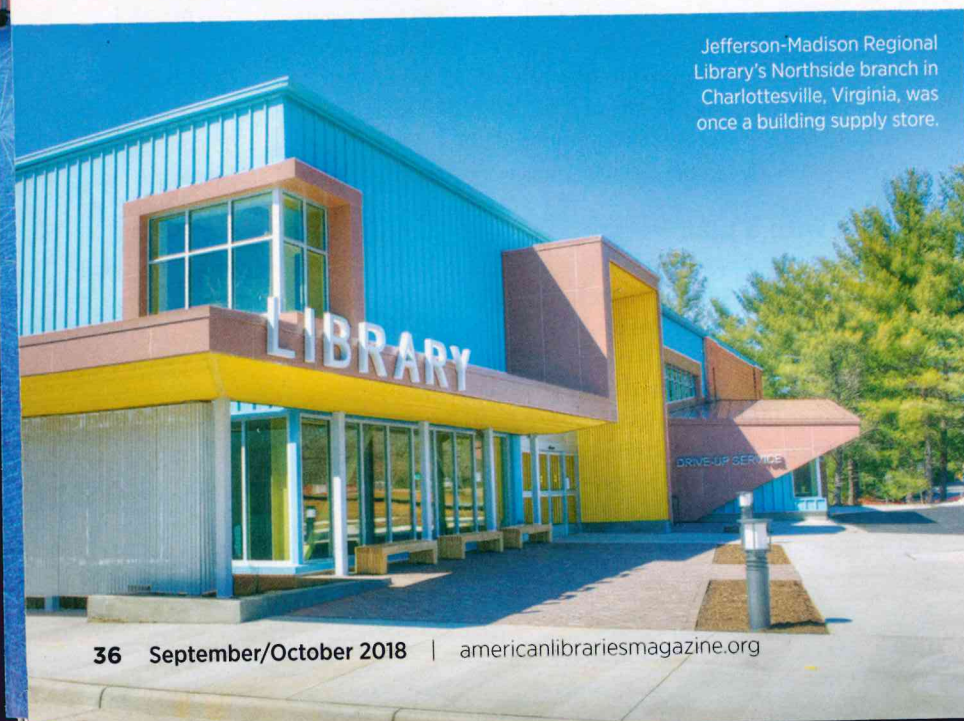
They also have potential problems:

- virtually no windows. How easily windows can be retrofitted will depend on the type of construction.
- potentially undesirable locations. Libraries need big-box stores where chains went bankrupt, not where a store moved out because the location was far from ideal.
- cheap construction. Since big-box stores are economically constructed, you will need engineers and architects to evaluate the condition of a building you are considering.

Big-box stores were designed to meet the retail needs of modern populations, and these have a lot in common with the library needs of modern populations, which makes the entire conversion project a lot easier.

**Schools.** Empty school buildings abound. Unfortunately, most have been abandoned for good reasons: They have outlived their natural life or were badly designed to begin with.

Most old schools will not meet a variety of building codes. Schools dating back to the 1970s or earlier may be awash in asbestos and lead paint. Despite the stability of schools, floors will probably not be strong enough to carry the weight of books. About the only space in an old school building that can be converted to a workable library is the gymnasium. Some gyms—like the



Jefferson-Madison Regional Library's Northside branch in Charlottesville, Virginia, was once a building supply store.

# STERLING LIBRARY



one in Westwood Elementary School in Oklahoma City—have been converted to attractive and functional libraries, but that presumes that the gym is large enough to meet the requirements for all those library functions that need to be in a single, open space. An even larger question is, once the gym is converted to a library, what happens to the rest of the school building? The last thing a library needs is to be part of an otherwise abandoned building.

**Banks.** Some communities have successfully converted bank buildings to public libraries. Some banks are more strongly constructed than many other commercial buildings, and they may be capable of carrying the weight of books without extra reinforcement.

Most bank conversions must consider what to do with old vaults. Vaults are strongly built and will probably be too expensive to remove. In the conversions we have seen, most vaults have been used for storage or office space. Obsolete vault doors may make interesting reminders of the building's history, but you'll at least have to disable the locking mechanisms and install some kind of bolted-on flanges on the floor that prevent the doors from swinging.

Many banks have drive-through service windows. It might be possible to convert them to book pickup windows. But drive-up service windows in libraries are not always successful because library users sometimes treat them not only as

places to pick up held books but also as short-order windows, where library users can request items that are not on hold but have to be searched and retrieved from throughout the library.

**Department stores.** Some communities have converted abandoned department stores into public libraries. With the coming of big-box stores and shopping centers, department stores tend to become available for other uses.

Department stores typically do not have floors strong enough to support library loads. In order to reduce loads, it may be necessary to use shorter shelving units and space them more widely apart, significantly increasing the amount of space necessary to store a given number of books. Lack of floor strength may be one of the greatest challenges in converting department stores to libraries.

**Strip malls.** There are advantages to housing a library in a former strip mall.

**PLACING PUBLIC LIBRARIES NEXT TO RETAIL STORES IS GOOD FOR BOTH.**

Loudoun County (Va.) Public Library used a vacant space in a shopping center for its Sterling branch.

Strip malls may be in highly visible locations, and placing public libraries next door to retail stores is good for both. But there are a number of potential problems.

Strip malls come and go. A dying strip mall is no place for a public library. Just as good commercial neighbors can be of great benefit to libraries (and libraries can greatly benefit the nearby businesses in strip malls), businesses can change quickly. Because libraries in strip malls are right next to the other businesses, if the clothing stores, toy stores, and bookstores are quickly replaced by liquor stores, tobacco shops, video gambling parlors, and bars, the desirability of the libraries' locations can quickly change.

As speculative commercial structures, strip malls may be very cheaply constructed and quickly thrown up. If someone is proposing a planned strip mall as a location, you'll need your architects and engineers to check out the quality of proposed construction, just as you will want them to evaluate completed buildings. Some strip malls do not have fire walls between stores. As a result, a fire that starts in one store can quickly spread to adjacent stores through their attics. Expansion is probably impossible without acquiring an



The Do Space in Omaha, Nebraska, is housed in a former big-box bookstore.

New buildings were constructed because the old ones were seriously inadequate. The old buildings may have toxic asbestos or lead paint. Parking may be inadequate for public library service.

Even worse, cities may run old buildings into the ground once new buildings are under way. If maintenance has stopped for more than a year, there may not be much left, certainly not enough to make the conversion to a public library economically sensible.

### Seeking help

Converting nonlibrary buildings to public libraries is done all the time. Sometimes everything works out beautifully, but on other occasions the library ends up spending far more on a reworked but dysfunctional building than it would spend on a brand-new one, and in addition is saddled with higher operating costs for the life of the building.

adjacent unit, and fire codes may make it impossible to join two units together.

In general, the only good public library use of strip malls may be as rented spaces for library branches or as temporary locations while main libraries are being rebuilt.

#### Abandoned government buildings.

Some communities have converted former government structures to public

libraries. Sometimes this can be very successful. Rantoul, Illinois, for example, converted a former US Air Force base bowling alley into a public library, but this was no ordinary bowling alley. It was a huge and sturdy structure with high ceilings and no load-bearing columns to get in the way.

Our experience is that old city buildings were often abandoned for good reason.

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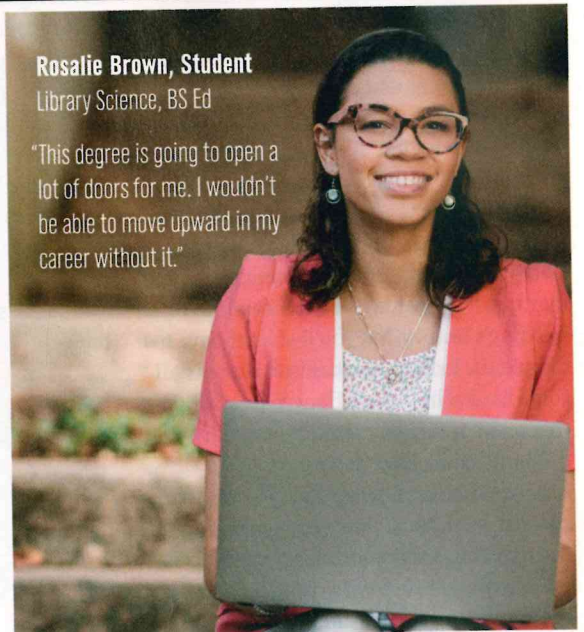


Photo: Dan Schwalm/HDR, Inc.

When people pressure you to accept or purchase an existing building, always get help before saying “yes.”

- The help includes a building program written without any conversion job in mind. Once it is finished, the program can be compared with the proposed building to be sure that the spaces you need can be provided there. Sometimes a building will be so unsuitable for reuse that your consultant’s opinion may be enough to stop things.
- An architect can help evaluate the building to ensure that it is in good condition and can be converted to a functional, modern library at a reasonable cost. Your architect will review code implications to be sure that modernizing the building will not embroil the library in a maze of code compliance issues. Your architect can also check for EPA concerns, such as asbestos, possible buried fuel tanks, and so on. In many cases, a quick examination will lead to the rejection of the proposed conversion project.

- Your architects may bring in engineers to evaluate the structure of the building, the condition of MEP services, any hidden threats, the ease of opening up internal spaces, and any difficulties involving accessibility.
- If the project passes initial checking, your programmers, architects, and engineers will need to review the ability of the building to meet all specified functional needs.
- At this point, your architects will need to develop a cost estimate. This is a dangerous area, particularly when it comes to remodeling. There may be pressure on your architect to lowball costs. In all cases of this type, your architects and other experts will need to report on projected remodeling costs, functional compromises that would result from remodeling, and the likely cost of building a similar structure from scratch. Rejecting a proposed conversion job may be unpopular with your community. This is one area where your hired outside experts will prove their worth. They can deliver the

bad news and then go home to distant communities where their annoyed neighbors will not snarl at them at the supermarket.

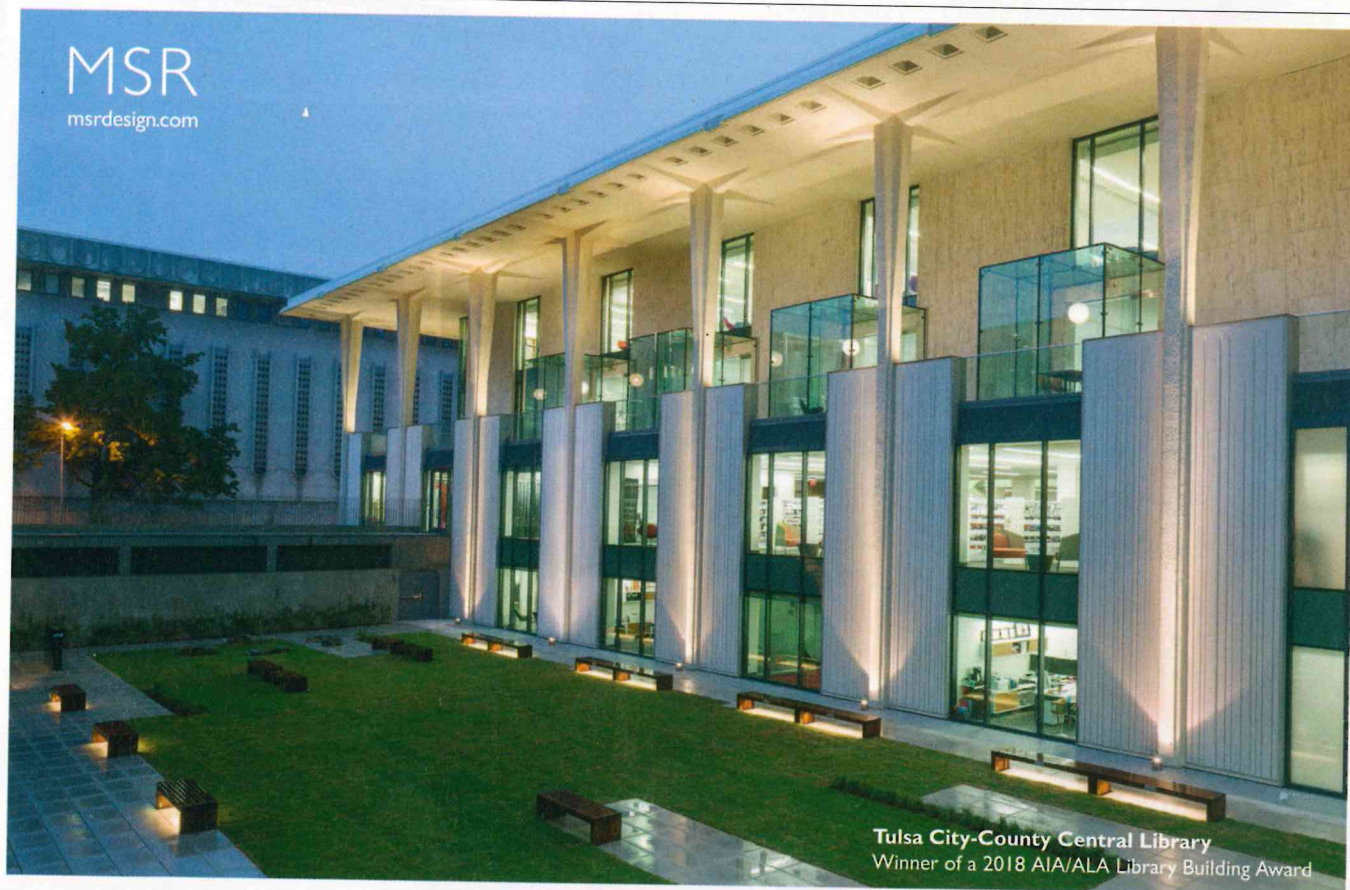
If all of this sounds negative, it’s because there are numerous pitfalls in conversion projects. Luckily, many excellent libraries are constructed by converting other buildings, so it’s a matter of caution rather than outright rejection. In general, fairly new buildings with wide-open spaces, high ceilings, good windows, sidewalk-level entrances, concrete slab floors, up-to-date MEP systems, and sufficient parking seem to offer the best possibilities. **AL**



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