



## Environments in Public Libraries for Young Children around the World

**Gonzalo Oyarzun**  
Santiago Public Library  
Santoago, Chile

**James R. Keller**  
VITETTA Library Design Studio  
Philadelphia, USA

**Katheleen R.T. Imhoff**  
Lexington Public Library  
Lexington, USA

**Meeting:** **103. Libraries for Children and Young Adults and Library Buildings and Equipment**

---

*WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 75TH IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL*

23-27 August 2009, Milan, Italy

<http://www.ifla.org/annual-conference/ifla75/index.htm>

---

### **Abstract:**

*The three part program provides a philosophical approach, a design approach and a pragmatic approach to creating space in public libraries for children on four continents. The first segment will present the approach for creating and sustaining the first major public library in Chile to provide significant library services to children and families. The second segment will illustrate the beginning and design of the first public library for children to be constructed in Oman. The third segment will provide images of specific solutions for children's space in libraries from Europe and the United States.*

<p><b>Biblioteca de Santiago/Santiago Public Library: a challenge for children and youth</b> Gonzalo Oyarzun</p>
--

A child's and youngster's library as a public square, where children and youngster's can go and have fun.

A child's and youngster's library as a public space, where children and youngster's can feel free to choose, explore and know.

A child's and youngster's library as an intimate place where children and youngster's can meet and interact with others, assuming and respecting their differences and times.

A child's and youngster's library as a place where parents and children can talk and know each other.

A child's and youngster's library as an environment in which teachers and students can experience, together, reading far from the school's curricular pressure.

A child's and youngster's library as a multimedia and interactive zone in which children have free access to books, new technologies, activities, highly trained professionals, comfortable furnishings, state-of-the-art infrastructure - to their own scale, in adequate opening times – and always having the chance to listen to a good story.

A child's and youngster's library as an experience.

With each passing day public libraries assume the task of de-scholarizing children's and young adult libraries. Aiming to contribute to form people in a more integral way, aiding from a completely different standpoint from school, improving personal competencies through reading motivation. In this line, motivation is assumed straightforwardly as the pleasure of reading, opposed to a measure of a particular reading comprehension level.

#### Santiago Public Library

Located in the Chilean Capital, Santiago Public Library was opened in November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2005. It proposed a revolutionary concept for this country, offering new modalities in attention and innovative services: broad attending times, including weekends; digital reference services, audiovisual collections, novelties services; child, youth, reference, general, literature and adult-themed collections; computer halls equipped to train in new information and communication technologies (*TICs*); integral handicapped access at every service; multifunctional auditorium; exhibition halls; and permanent reading motivation programs.

This 22.000 m<sup>2</sup> (236.806 sq.ft.) library appears with the aim of bringing a modern and efficient public library service to the whole community, different from the National Library (*Biblioteca Nacional*) and inserted into the national public library network. From its inception, is the model and experimental service for the development of other libraries in the country. Santiago Public Library gives an answer to the requests of a region with more than six million inhabitants, demanding more access to reading and information day after day.

With approximately a million visits every year, children and youngsters are essentially their main users, representing more than 65% of this number. This is no random occurrence: the Library is located in a neighborhood with a significant number of schools and daycares. Still, being located near important private and public transport routes should be taken in account. As an example: a few steps away from the Library two subway stations from different lines exist.

#### Design.

The shapes, materials, and the relationships people used to have with children and youths are not the same ones that existed thirty years ago. And thus it is easily

predictable these will not be the same in the next thirty years. The protagonist role children and youth have today in a country's undertaking and political decision making; the level of participation they have in school, family, or city; the incorporation of an important and massive number of technological advances; the transformations in the educational and cultural national planning scheme; all this must be considered at the moment of designing and building of such features.

Most of the library users belong to the poorest areas of the city. In their small and generally over populated houses, it is unlikely to have adequate spaces for comfortable study or leisure activities. Then, the library must be a comfortable and cosy space, an expansion of home, a place they can feel of their own.

Neither should the library have signage of any prohibition at all: talking, even speaking aloud is permitted, eating a sandwich or drinking a soda is accepted as well. Why not? One could think such practices may damage a book, for instance. But if he cannot do that in the library, that kid would borrow the book, would take it home, would lie down on his bed, would anyway have a sandwich and a soda, and would open the book to read it comfortably. Our policy differs by far from this: we bet more to education than to banning. It is better for that kid to be in the library, it is a more comfortable place. It is our task to teach him not to damage the books and share them with others at the same time.

But we also had to ask our community what kind of infant and juvenile library they expected or longed for. That is why a year before the inauguration, meetings with teachers, parents, and specialists were held in order to know about their expectations and understanding of a facility like this one. Besides, we interview children and youths so they would tell us or draw how their ideal library should be. From these findings we took important decisions.

Finally, with all this data, the librarians committed themselves to preparing the books, materials, and services which the new library should provide. As previously said, the information needed to be thematically organized instead of books arranged according to numeric and alphabetical codes. That is the reason why thematic areas were created so any child or youngster could understand, very different to the arrangement given by the Dewey System of classification, the most commonly used in Chile.

Also, the library's staff is different. The configuration of interdisciplinary teams was a keystone of the project success. Librarians, all levels teachers, entertainers, performers, story-tellers, sketch artists, and a vast team constituted by hired and voluntary personnel are essential.

### Children's Library

Deemed mainly to children aged 0 to 8, this is a playful area which main purpose is to promote imagination including well defined areas for babies, infants, and children. It aims to be a space for entertainment, where children get to books and develop their imagination through games. Everything has been carefully thought: the areas for babies are implemented with appropriate spaces for pushchairs, and some collections of parental interest at the same time, as if they were in a park.

In this room there is a space dedicated to early readers, from 0 to 3 years old, “Born to Read”, where together with their parents they can share reading, games and toys of different kind. This allows the development of artistic, recreational or didactic nature. This area has changing nappies tables and toilets which dimensions and designs are adequate for the younger ones.

The room also has an audiovisual section, and another spot for “the Story Time”, infant theatre, and puppets show. As a basic concept of the whole room, every component element is movable in order to create new environments.

### Library youth

Connected to the Infant area through an interior stairs, this room is the logical continuation of the previous one. Its collections are focused to children aged 8 to 16, and aims to intensify their imagination and enjoyment for reading.

It can be defined as an informal educational space, in which the youths could explore a world of new possibilities by means of reading, literature workshops, theatre, films, Internet, role-playing games, among others.

Its setting has been specially designed to offer the young users a place which invites and welcomes them: playful, relaxed, without the formalities of traditional reading rooms. It has sections for audiovisuals, literature workshop, and theatre. It also has touch screens and audiovisual channel circuits for projecting films and documentaries.

### Impact and projection.

With the bringing on of “Santiago Public library”, public libraries have started to be considered as relevant places of national matters. Public libraries are part of the political and economical agenda of the country. The principal meetings related to childhood, youth, and secondary student’s topics take place in our facilities. Thus, “Santiago Public library” has become a benchmark of public policies. The Chilean President, Michelle Bachelet has passed a law which states that all districts lacking of a library, will have one before the year 2010.

Now those libraries are being built under the format of “Santiago Public Library”, including children and youths in an irreplaceable proposal of education, culture, and participation.

## **A Children's Public Library in Muscat, Oman**

James R. Keller, AIA

In the summer of 2007 approximately forty interested citizens developed the concept of the first Public Library for Children and Families in Oman. The founders formed a Board of Directors to realize their vision - with Her Highness Seyyida, Dr. Mona Al Said as the Honorary Chair and Dr. Samira Moosa as Board Chair.

The Board created a Vision Statement in the autumn of 2007 and selected our firm - VITETTA of Philadelphia - to prepare a feasibility study and the subsequent architectural design.

The Sultanate of Oman is located on the Gulf of Oman. Its heritage features a great seafaring tradition, as one might expect in a country with 3,165 km of coastline.

Oman has a population of 2.5 million - including almost 700,000 expatriates. Arabic is the official language and English is the language in common.

For its size, Oman boasts significant UNESCO-classified World Heritage Sites including Bat—with tombs dating back to 3,000 BC, the Fort of Bahla, and the fascinating Frankincense Route.

In January, 2008 the Board received the gift of the building site from His Highness Seyyid Haitham, Minister of Heritage and Culture, as well as financial support from the private sector - in particular funding for design from the Oman Oil Company, Mr. Ahmed Al Wahabi, C.E.O.

The site for the Children's Public Library is located west of the Muttrah – the city market in Muscat - Oman's capital city. The site is relatively flat and narrow - stretching east to west. To the north is an ocean inlet and surrounding marsh that is rich with biodiversity.

As part of the planning, a focus group was conducted with twenty two boys and girls from Muscat. The children represented a cross section of socio-economic backgrounds and included several children from the local orphanage.

A recent survey indicates there are over 190,000 children between 6 months and 19 years of age in Muscat alone. Therefore, part of the Founders vision is that; “The Library is to provide free access to library resources and services - to the children of Oman from birth to 18 years of age.”

The Library will be a destination for children and families of Oman, and will be a model for sustainable design and progressive library service concepts for the region. The architecture will embody the spirit, history and beauty of Omani architecture and yet will incorporate progressive elements that will define its character.

The Library will evoke its mission of literacy, learning and community through its materials, scale, spatial rhythm and the use of color.

Service to children will be celebrated through the use of imaginative interior spaces and light. Colored glass, tactile materials, textures of surfaces and other timeless architectural elements will be used in synthesis to create mystery, discovery, comfort and delight.

The Library will be a complement to the neighboring Children's Museum, Museum of Natural History and future Children's Theatre. The Library will connect with these buildings by means of learning gardens and pathways.

The Library will connect with its beautiful natural surroundings by orienting views and maximizing natural connections to the environment.

The arrival at the Library will be an important part of the sequence of travel to, through, and from the building. The sequence of movement throughout the building will be clear and inviting.

The Library will be entered from the raised street level center entrance through the Lobby. The Atrium Lobby will feature colored glass discs that will cast prisms of color throughout the space by day and will glow from outside by night.

The design will maximize the use of architectural form, scale and materials in unusual ways to create interest and even drama. The second level of the library sets back from the north wall to provide dramatic views up and through the space from the first level. A zig zag formed cantilever informs and invites the first level customers - young and elementary school age children - that something exciting awaits above - the second level - where the teen and young adult space is found.

The first level of the library will contain the early childhood and parenting area to the west (or left of the plan) and the elementary age area to the east (or right). Features of this floor are the Omani seating area - an area with cushions on the floor to create a traditional conversation area - and an area called "Visions to the World". The "Visions to the World" area will have interactive display, computers and collections of world geography/culture and arts. This level is not only open to view the floor above at the north side, but also to expansive views of the sea.

The second level will contain the young teen area to the west (or left of the plan) and the young adult area to the east (or right). This level will also contain the administrative offices and a special collection area for persons with visual disabilities. This level overlooks level one through the cut out at the zig zag glass wall - sharing vistas to the park and sea.

The third level will contain a large meeting room, small meeting/conference room, a computer training lab, staff workroom and hall gallery. The fourth floor (not shown) is an open floor for tenant rental and income for the Library.

Sustainable design elements include a green roof terrace for special programs.

The optimal direction for ambient light in Muscat is north, where large un-shaded windows will provide abundant light and breath-taking views of the coastline. The

coloration of the window openings will provide a playful interaction of shape, form, void and color both by day and by night.

The Library will be a building that children and families will want to visit, both for its programs, collections and services, and also for its sense of place. The Library will inspire children of all ages to learn, grow, and be a part of the community - both in Oman and globally.

The Library will be a place of calm and a place of activity, a place that inspires creativity and stirs the imagination.

### **Children's Spaces from around the World**

Kathleen R.T. Imhoff

Integrating the three universal “A’s” of building design into the planning process is critical when designing spaces for young children anywhere in the world. The three “A’s” are Adaptability, Accessibility, and Aesthetics. In this paper I will focus on demonstrating these principles in innovative children’s spaces in the following public libraries in the world featuring the Amsterdam Public Library, the Netherlands, Lexington Public Library, Lexington, Kentucky, U.S.A., Asker Public Library in Oslo, Norway and the Indianapolis Public Library in Indianapolis, Indiana, U.S.A.

As the world for children continues to rapidly change pace, it is necessary to design adaptable, child centered spaces to meet the informational and recreational needs of children. In the past, children’s areas were well defined rooms separated from the rest of the library area. In addition, there often were separate, purpose built rooms for story telling or for craft activities. With the ever increasing building costs and the pace of world change, it is more difficult to foresee and plan what an ideal child center space will be five years from now. Adaptability of children’s space is increasingly important when planning a new or remodeled building.

Shelves on wheels allow for maximum flexibility in children’s space. This is the main area in the Village Branch Library, in Lexington. With the shelves being on wheels, staff can easily move the shelves together or into another room to allow for space for a children’s program.

Sliding glass doors allow for the same space to be used for two functions at different times of the day. At the Northside library the children’s story space is glassed in and the doors are always open unless a story hour is being held.

Multi-functional meeting spaces enhance the usability of children’s areas. Shelving that allows for multiple uses also works very well for children.

Accessibility is of particular importance in areas to be used by children. It is necessary to define the age of the children the space should serve but, since children grow at their own pace, it should be easily accessible for all. Space for children in strollers, parking space for the strollers, designated, but defined, spaces for children who crawl as well as furniture of all sizes should be included in a children’s area. Shelving that is height appropriate.

As well as ways to house games, puzzles, board books, easy readers displayed face out and music needs to be considered in planning. Service desks and tables need to be wheelchair accessible and approachable for younger children. Devices such as low vision machines, computers with adaptive devices and children's Braille books might require special spaces. Aesthetics are paramount when planning spaces for children. Decorative and innovative treatment to the entrances of a children's area automatically attracts children and invites them to explore the space. Wall murals painted by local artists, famous illustrator's of children's books or by children themselves serve as magnets to draw children to a space. Aesthetically pleasing signage which provides way finding for children, their parents or caregivers can serve as a design element.

The use of strong colors can be a low cost way of defining children's spaces. Themed graphics appropriate to the local area is another way to attract children. Children are attracted to interactive spaces with attractive features. A large scale elephant, a tree with a smiling cat, a play space, a tower with a climbing space, a night sky, and horses, are a few feature items that have been used successfully in public library children's spaces. Think of the unique feature of your town or city and investigate if that feature could be integrated in the children's library area in an appealing way. If you have a local children's illustrator, see if you can get permission to enlarge their pictures on a children's wall as a feature. Many libraries have used puppet theatres as special interest items.

Visit other children's spaces: children's museums, innovative schools, children's theatres, children's bookstores and children's parks. Seek out pictures of children's libraries featured in architectural issues of library magazines, pick a few metropolitan cities from other parts of the world and take a virtual tour on the web and look at their children's areas. Look for places where children are and try to determine what attracted them to that space. Talk with children about their likes and dislikes.

Remember the three architectural "A's": adaptability, accessibility and aesthetics, learn from other successful children's libraries and spaces and have fun designing the best public library for the young children in your world.