



**Program: Jacksonville Public Library Children's  
and Teens Libraries**

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**Meeting:**

**103. Libraries for Children and Young Adults**

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**ABSTRACT**

*In August 2001, Robert A. M. Stern Architects began work on a new facility to house the main branch of the Jacksonville Public Library system. Part of the design team's charge was to design discreet spaces for the Children's and Teen areas of the new library. The architects were asked to determine the location and interior design direction of each space in the new library.*

*The Children's Library was created to reflect the geography of the region, with the entrance spaces modeled on the swamplands of northeast Florida. As patrons move further into the department, the interior design of the space evolves to reflect the natural elements one discovers moving from inland areas to the ocean. Traditional storytime rooms and group gathering areas were included in the department layout, as well as space for computers and library self-check units. The Department is also directly adjacent to an enclosed courtyard, allowing for supervised outdoor children's programming.*

*The design of the Teen Library was taken in a much different direction. In deference to the types of materials that teens overwhelmingly use, the department was located directly off the Popular Materials section and the interiors and furnishings were designed to facilitate the teens' use of audio, video and magazines from that department. The interior design is dominated by a series of wave planes suspended from the ceiling, some of which are designed to extend to the floor, creating abstract lounge seating areas.*

*We propose to make our presentation in 2 parts. First, we will lead a brief virtual tour of the Children's and Teen Departments, with illustrative floor plans and images of the spaces. Alex Lamis will discuss the design process and the challenges and opportunities that the design team discovered in creating the spaces.*

*Barbara Gubbin, the Library's current director, will lead the second half of the session, a discussion of "lessons learned" as patrons and library staff began to use the space as well as a forecast of how the Library will move forward with programming in the future.*

<b>First Presenter, Alex Lamis: <i>Architectural Intentions</i></b>
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### I. Overview of the Library Project

In 2005 the city of Jacksonville opened a large (30,000m<sup>2</sup>) new Central Library on Hemming Plaza, a principal square in the center of the city. Built as part of a major public works program called the Better Jacksonville Plan, the new library replaced a building from the 1960s that no longer met the needs of this growing sun-belt city in northeastern Florida. With a total project cost of approximately \$100 million (US), the new library represented a significant commitment on the part of the city leadership to education and the advancement of the library system into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In addition to the central library, a number of new and rehabilitated library branches were constructed throughout the city, as part of the Better Jacksonville Plan.

The design of the library came about as the result of an international design competition with the design of Robert A. M. Stern Architects selected from among four finalists. The competition phase extended for four months and included several intermediate working sessions with stake-holders including library staff and administration, the library governing board and members of the city administration, under the guidance of a professional competition advisor. During these work sessions, and through the development of the building program, the desires of the staff, and especially children's and teens' services, were taken into consideration. Once the selection of the design team had been made, additional meetings with library staff and administration developed the details of the children's and teens' sections of the library. These areas had been underserved in the existing building and provision of high quality library services for children and teens were a priority of the mayor and his administration.

The goal of the design of the library, including the children's and young adult's spaces, was to create a series of inviting environments catering to many different demographics. As a result, there is no single overarching aesthetic within the building but rather a series of distinct "places" that each cater to different groups within the community: retired people, parents with young children, the business community, students, researchers, and so on. There are also common gathering spaces where the entire community can come together as a group.

## II. The Children's Library

The building program called for an 1800m<sup>2</sup> library for children ranging from toddlers to “tweens” – up to approximately 12 years of age. This wide range of ages necessitated the division of the space into zones catering to different age groups. However, the design of the entire Children's Library has an overarching thematic consistency.

In the early stages of the design it was determined that in order to attract and interest the maximum number of children, who today grow up in a media-saturated environment, the design of the space should have thematic content – it should “tell a story” that was specific and widely accessible. Several different narrative concepts for the space were explored, including ‘water world,’ ‘through the trees,’ and ‘fantasyland’. Through a series of discussions these ideas were recombined and a narrative grew from the specific geography and natural history of the Jacksonville region, situated along the Atlantic coast in semi-tropical lowlands which include both forest and water. Jacksonville is home to lush vegetation and a wide variety of birds, animals and fish. While there is a strong sentiment for the preservation of this natural beauty, the pressures of a rapidly growing population and heavy industry put a strain on this environment. The Children's Library celebrates the natural beauty of the region. Children enter through a 2m high sculptural rendition of the high swamp grasses that line the many inland waterways and can imagine themselves to be small animals or bugs crawling through the grass. Lighting and a tape of natural sounds reinforce the experience. Inside the Library the colors of the floors and walls reflects the dappled green and blue of the environment. Round “porthole” windows between the main space and subsidiary creative labs give the feeling of underwater.

Robert A. M. Stern Architects worked together with the local fabricator Sally's Corporation to design and build custom furniture in the shapes of local plants and animals: a large circular bench is in the form of an alligator, another in the form of a manatee, a third like a lotus blossom. There are chairs that look like leaves, turtles, and snails, and small tables that take the form of mushrooms.

An enclosed theater for story-telling programs takes the form of a screened-in porch. When children enter the theater they seem to be in an outdoor room, and lush sculptural plants can be seen “outside.” As the lights dim, night appears to fall, and a chorus of insects and frogs can be heard. An “audio-animatronic” or robotic owl, which appears to move and speak, welcomes the children and introduces the program.

Computers are seamlessly integrated into the Children's Library, with programs elected by the staff to be age-appropriate. Traditional library services, and especially books, are not diminished but augmented by the addition of electronic technology. The Children's Library was designed to accommodate new technologies or other opportunities that may present themselves in the future.

### III. Teens' Library

The Teens' Library evokes the atmosphere of a cool clubhouse, a place very different from either home or school, a place that will act as a draw for notoriously finicky American teenagers.

The Teens' Library is located on the ground floor of the four-story building, easily accessible from the front door, purposefully placed immediately adjacent to the popular materials collection, which will also attract teens. The Popular Materials area has a bookstore feel with casual seating, music listening stations, a dropped grid of spotlights, movable book and material cases and a youthful sense of color and design.

As with the Children's Library, a series of thematic options were presented to the Library; in this case they were 'Life's a Beach'; 'Pop and Funk,' featuring Pop Art and 1960's images; and 'Hit the Road,' derived from the American infatuation with the open road as well as the information super-highway. By mixing and matching these themes the final 'vibe' of the teen room was developed. The Teens' Library is entered through a covered threshold separate from the rest of the library that gives it a distinct identity. Bold, wave-like ceiling elements give the space the dynamic quality and are rendered in bold bright colors. An overscaled seating area with a long couch, sofa, and chairs encourages casual conversations among as many as a dozen teens. Video displays are distributed throughout the space; in order to control and limit unwanted noise coming from the displays, sound is channeled through semi-spherical "cones of silence" to the individual user. The desk on duty is prominently located so the librarian can monitor all activities in the space as well as support teens by answering their questions, assisting with technical issues, and proactively helping with homework projects. There are informal seating groups with café-style seats and magazine racks, banks of computer stations, and more private, quieter areas for study. Classic modern furniture by Charles Eames and others, salvaged from the 1960's library, was re-used in the Teens' Library.

**END, part one**

### Background

Jacksonville is a city of 851,000 spread over 2033 square km – the largest city in terms of land area in the contiguous United States. As described by Alex Lamis above, the Better Jacksonville Plan, which built 7 new libraries and renovated almost all the remainder, brought the system from 14 branch libraries and a Main Library to 20 branch libraries and a Main library. These libraries were constructed and opened in a 5- year period with the new Main Library being the last new building to be opened to the public in November 2005. The new Main Library was an instant success with over 13,000 people attending the official opening.

In fiscal year 2004-2005, the year before the new Main Library opened, circulation of teen and children’s materials from the Main Library was 61,878 items; in the most recent fiscal year 2007-2008 circulation had increased to 328,386 items. Programming for teens which had been almost non-existent (57 programs in a year) increased to 282 programs and attendance at children’s programming increased by 150%.

Location of the new Main Library cannot be a major factor propelling this significant growth in use because the new facility is located only three blocks from the former Main Library, which you can see from the windows. This is a downtown location, in an area which has very limited housing, few schools nearby, and tends to “close-up” in the evening and weekends despite continuing efforts by businesses and the city to encourage more downtown visitors. Despite what might be considered “obstacles” the Main Library has been an overwhelming success in the community. The oft repeated adage “Build it and they will come” rings true in Jacksonville. Responding to our online customer survey Jacksonville residents regularly tell us that they bring visiting guests to the classically designed, imposing 297,000 square foot building to show it off. The conference center and open courtyard – this is Florida after all – are popular venues for meetings, receptions, parties and weddings; there is a café, and a bookstore is operated by the Friends of the Library. And there are the specially designed and dedicated teen and children’s spaces, each with their own clientele, who come from all over Jacksonville. The Main Library has become a destination in the true sense of that word.

### The Teen Room: What Works!

The design, as Alex Lamis has described, is “cool clubhouse” but also timeless. The bright colors, the curvy ceiling design, the large couch and comfortable furnishings do not “date” the space; they attract young people and since the design is like no other space in the building it becomes “their” space. The location was deliberately chosen to be adjacent to the popular materials collection and away from the Children’s Room which is on the floor above, and has its own entrance using glass doors. No other department in the building has doors for its entryway – another distinguishing feature which allows for noise management as well as emphasizing the special nature of the space.

Staff and teen customers give high marks for the stereo system with surround sound and TV screens. There are 13 computers which have been sufficient so far and teens can bring in their own laptops if they have them as the entire building has Wi-Fi capability. When funds are available we will consider adding laptops to check out and use in the space as many of the teens who come downtown do not have computers of their own, yet want to manage their FaceBook and MySpace pages and get on the web.

Staff gives high marks to the space design which allows them to monitor the space effectively from their desk – there is very little “dead” space. We ask all our customers to follow a posted Code of Conduct and do not tolerate poor behavior. Staff wears wireless phones to communicate with customers and can also call security if necessary. This dispels any concern there could be about the location of the teen room away from the main traffic pattern and being in an enclosed space.

Study rooms – we have two. Early on there were plans to put snack and drink machines in one of these to make a quasi cafe. We do allow covered drinks in the Teen Room and with a café in our library lobby staff is generally pleased we did not go ahead with the food machines. Both rooms are used as conference rooms and often as quiet spaces. The latter is important and appreciated by the teens. We allow cell phone use and the teen space can be noisy. However, we find most teens monitor themselves with little staff intervention.

Regular shelving provides access to print materials, magazines, and media. We also have a large comic book and manga collection which circulates.

There is a dedicated teen staff for this space, two professional librarians, one of whom is the manager, two paraprofessionals and a clerk. There is a staff work room immediately accessible from the staff desk in the teen room with work spaces for each staff member and access to a larger shared work space to work on projects requiring a sink or large table to spread out.

#### The Teen Room: What Have We Learned?

The space we have is sufficient – approximately 4200 SF – this gives a level of intimacy to the space which teens appreciate. Any large scale teen activities – the annual Battle of the Bands for example, are held in our auditorium with comfortable seating for 400 people. However, teen space must be flexible. It is used for a very broad range of activities – groups using the computers, individuals listening to music, reading, playing Go!, making crafts, drawing and painting, writing, watching movies, talking, playing games on the computers, doing homework, and participating in our electronic classroom with programs such as “Pizza and Pursuit of Resources” which teaches information literacy skills. If we were to reconfigure the space today we would put as much as we could on wheels. Let the teen furniture be “big” – teens love this – but easy to move around. You should also anticipate that teens enjoy sitting on the floor; space and furnishings to support this are important. Today we would probably reduce the size of the staff desk and make it mobile as well for added flexibility.

Provide more display space than you would expect the teens to need and then some more. In addition to staff displays of books and media, calendars and event announcements, our teens are always making things, writing poetry on the magnetic poetry board, drawing and painting – they want to display it all on both vertical and horizontal surfaces – at the same time! New and different displays both involve teens in their own space – we have a teen council which helps us plan programs and activities – and attracts teens to the space to see what is “on display.” The space design should make the most of this marketing opportunity.

And don’t invest in any technology, equipment or furniture which cannot withstand heavy use or be repaired easily. Simple to say but difficult to do when in the middle of a major design project and funds are there to install new furnishings and new gadgetry. Our listening stations for example, which are attached to the wall, are frequently out of order and in today’s world when most teens have iPods or mp3 players are these really necessary?

What else would our teens and staff like in their teen room? When I asked this question answers ranged from an aquarium, to a dance floor, a videogame console, collaborative workstations to allow 2-3 teens to work together at a single computer, and a recording studio. The teens also want their own self-check out station like those we have at the main circulation desk and in the Children’s Department to check out their own materials.

From a single range of bookshelves in a corridor at the “old” Main Library – located there for lack of any other space - teen services have come a long way at the Jacksonville Public Library and much of this can be attributed to designating and designing a space with teens in mind.

#### Now we go upstairs to the Children’s Department ....

For many of our customers this is the greatest success story of our new Main Library! Parents and grandparents come from all over town to bring their children and grandchildren to toddler time, stories with Mrs. Owl, bi-lingual storyhour (French and Spanish), arts and crafts, and special programs such as guitar lessons. Children come during the week from day care centers and schools. Often the children and caregivers eat lunch in our open-air courtyard adjacent to the Children’s Room after attending a children’s program. The adjacency of the Children’s Room with its “environmental” theme, as Alex Lamis has already described, to the courtyard adds a significant extra dimension to the capacity of the children’s space to accommodate groups and at different times in the day.

This Children’s Room is easily eight times larger than in the previous library and the design theme, which reflects the environment of northeast Florida is timeless – it will never be dated. With its blue and green “outdoor” colors, anthropomorphic furnishings and low shelving the Children’s Room, just like the teen space is clearly meant for children. It is their space.

The various designated spaces are well used and allow for programming concurrently for different groups. There are two arts and crafts rooms with sinks, flooring which can be easily cleaned, work spaces and child sized furniture. With dedicated art space

and an artist on staff this makes for imaginative and creative programming. The Children's Theatre which hosts Mrs. Owl is used by staff and performance groups for story hour – it works particularly well for toddler time as the floor is carpeted and the low light provides a sense of intimacy. It also hosts sing-alongs, classes and plays. Additional space for children to play and “let off steam” would be welcome if it was available, and we would benefit from a space specifically designed for babies with comfortable seating for parents to both watch their children and to “visit” between themselves. In another of our libraries we have designed a “baby-space” which has been very well received and staff report that mothers linger longer in the library as a result.

The large-scale furniture, the couches designed as an alligator and a manatee as well as a boat for a family reading space, are attractive and well-used. However, the surfaces are too hard for the smallest children to play and climb on. The concept is very appealing but providing a softer surface would mean less monitoring of the furniture by staff concerned for child safety.

The Children's Room has a self service check-out machine installed after the library had been open for two years – a great hit with kids and parents alike. It saves parents having to queue up or juggle books and children in the primary circulation area downstairs, and children are fearless when it comes to technology and demand that even the most technology averse parent let them use it! There are sixteen computers for children placed on child-sized furniture, which are well used.

When I asked the staff what changes or additions they would like to see in this space to better accommodate their young customers their answers included more display space for children's art and crafts, a space for nursing mothers to have some privacy, and a family restroom for use by parents and children of either sex though they did note that the child sized furnishings in the two children's restrooms are much appreciated. The staff desk in this area has not been as successful as in the teen area. The Children's Room, which runs the length of one side of the building is long rather than wide and placement of the staff desk so that it is easily accessible to the staff work area but set back from the entrance to the department, is problematic in terms of viewing the whole space. Our answer has been to institute a staff roaming program, now in place throughout the Main Library but begun in the Children's Room, which has the staff roaming the space to provide assistance with finding materials or using the computers, but also to ensure children are not “lost” and to provide an extra level of security.

One final comment from Senior Children's Librarian Keith Hayes, manager of the Children's Room – provide a globe in your children's area. We have one and it has been so heavily used over the past four years with little fingers “finding” Jacksonville that Florida is now completely worn away!

A Children's Room should be a place for exploration whether in books, on computers, through listening to stories, making music, singing and dancing, making crafts and interacting with other children and with family members. Designing your library's children's space to enhance a child's sense of adventure so that it is fun to visit and provides the opportunity for a different adventure each time will attract children and families to your library as it has done to our Main Library, literally in their thousands.



For more information about the Jacksonville Public Library, our Teen or Children's Services you may contact Library Director Barbara Gubbin at [bgubbin@coj.net](mailto:bgubbin@coj.net).