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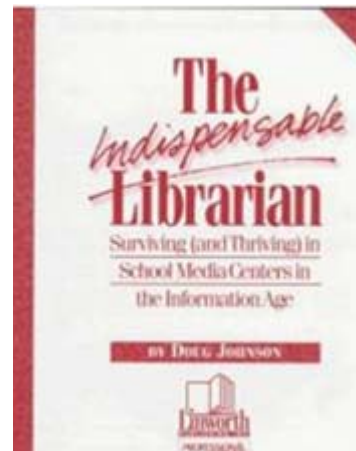
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## Imagining the Future of the School Library

**Without a doubt, the school library remains one of them most symbolic, protected, and expensive 'spaces' on any campus. But will future designers of school libraries be recreating sacred book spaces of the past or will technology and the 'consumer' inspire new design strategies for the future?**

For many, the library is the literal information bridge to the future. Organizations such as the [Robin Hood Foundation](#) and [Room to Read](#) dedicate themselves to building and re-imagining school library spaces around the world by filling shelves with books and making library spaces relevant for our youngest readers. At the same time, with a fast-moving revolution of technology hitting campuses around the world in ways never before imagined, provocative discussions are beginning to challenge the traditional status quo of the school library both in terms of purpose and space. More and more, [Library 2.0](#) is used to define this conversational re-imagination process.



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**With this in mind, DesignShare spoke with 2 passionate library experts — Doug Johnson and Rolf Erikson — to gain better insight into serving the information needs of students, schools, and communities via the future of school library planning and design.** Doug is the author of [The Indispensable Librarian: Surviving \(And Thriving\) in School Media Centers](#) and the [Blue Skunk Blog](#); Rolf is the lead author of [Designing A School Library Media Center for the Future](#). Full bio's and contact information are available at the end of this conversation.

**DesignShare: If you were to make one “grand” prediction about the future of libraries to kick-start our conversation, what does your crystal ball tell you?**

**Doug:**

All libraries will need to redefine their “value-added” qualities. The reality is that information seekers no longer need to visit a physical library to meet their basic information needs. Growing affluence means that many readers can and will purchase information rather than borrow it. The “Net Gen” prefers the visual and the virtual.

I see three primary things libraries can do:

- Become the high touch environments in a high tech world. (Think Barnes & Noble)
- Offer our services in a virtual environment. (Think online banking)
- Become uber information experts. (Think a highly competent, highly personalized travel agent)

**Rolf:**

This is more of a hope than a prediction:

- More and more school administrators will recognize the growing body of research that demonstrates the positive effect of school libraries and school librarians on student reading abilities and academic achievement;
- Architects and school facility planners will recognize that their end product will benefit from working with experienced school librarians who have expertise in school library facility design, and they will bring someone with that unique expertise and

by designers, university professors, architects, planning consultants, educators, technologists, futurists, and ecologists. Publications include podcasts, detailed case studies, conference proceedings, interviews, original research, editorials, thesis projects, and practical design guidelines.

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perspective to the design process;

- Recognizing that there are no good reasons to design school libraries that are based on an outdated model, that are too much like school libraries from the 1960s, everyone involved in the planning of new school libraries will work together to achieve innovative design;
- Recognizing that instructional technology and library programs overlap in so many ways, and that benefits can be reaped with staff members working closely as a team rather than as separate entities, school officials will strive for a philosophical, functional, and physical merger of the school library with the IT program, with a faculty center and spaces for staff development, as well as spaces where teachers can work with (and learn from) students, school librarians, and IT staff; and
- School libraries as a “place” will continue to be important, but library staff will expand programs beyond the library walls and create virtual libraries capable of reaching and serving students wherever they are, both at and away from school.

Much of the time I am pessimistic and find it difficult to believe that my hope will come true. I fear education will continue down a well-worn path, where it is viewed primarily as a cost, rather than as an investment, with too much emphasis on managing students, rather than providing environments for learning.

The end result is school facilities that are inadequate, and everyone is shortchanged.

**DesignShare: What experience have you had in terms of the planning or renovation of library spaces? What has been the most successful project in terms of what the librarians and the school community needed? What has been the least successful, for whatever reason? What was the biggest take-away you had looking back on these projects?**

**Doug:**

I've had a role in helping design 4 new library media centers and remodel quite a number of others. You can read my “take aways” in a set of handouts I used with a (now somewhat dated) workshop I gave on facilities design. ([See this link:](#))

The last media centers I designed were in the early 90s when technology was just making its presence felt in schools. I have always been proud that the libraries I was working on then assumed the library would be the technology hub of the school with

lab spaces, wiring closets, research min-labs, etc. as an integral part of them. At the same time, we designed for flexibility, great aesthetics, comfort, and social interactivity as well.

It's hard to call a media center "unsuccessful" based on its design alone since I have seen excellent media programs run in very poor facilities. The biggest mistake I've seen was in trying to create a good program by simply redesigning space without paying attention to staffing. The firm that hired me was not happy when I suggested this.

I was recently in a school that had an "E-library" that was nothing but a couple computer labs pushed end to end. It was a very cold and sterile place. To be fair, it just opened and it takes a while for most places to start looking homey and lived in, but I am not sure if this area ever will. For now, I am sure the kids will glom on to the area, but once portable information devices take hold, it may well sit empty.

**Rolf:**

I've been a school library facilities design consultant for fifteen years, with experience working on over eighty projects for public and independent schools at all levels, K-12, in the U.S. and internationally. Additionally, I am the lead author of "Designing a School Library Media Center for the Future," American Library Association (2001), currently being revised (2nd edition), with an estimated publication date June 2007. Finally, I am a presenter on school library design at state, regional, and national conferences.

The most successful recent projects (I've chosen two because they are examples of very different projects) with which I have been involved include:

First: [K-12 library for the Vinalhaven School](#), a small (210 students), K-12 school 15 miles off the coast of Maine. Planning a fully-functional library for a small K-12 school presents many challenges. Overall space needs to reflect the size of the school, yet certain resources need to be provided regardless of number of students. Decisions need to be made concerning which resources will be separate and which will be shared. And the wide range of ages of students who will use the library necessitates some separate spaces where the different age groups can feel

ownership. The Vinalhaven School library connects four distinct school wings: K-2, 3-5, middle, and high school. The library has two entrances, one for K-5 and one for middle and high school. K-5 and middle/high school students have separate seating areas with separate fiction and nonfiction collections on opposite sides of the library. A central core consists of the circulation/service area and reference, both print and electronic formats. In a small space, a functional interior was created that works very well. Adding to the success is the fact that the interior is inviting, with modern and comfortable furnishings.

Second: [Simsbury, CT, High School library](#). This library for a high school of 1500 is successful for a number of reasons. It is an effective learning space, with a separate library classroom/computer lab, a distance learning classroom, and three small group study rooms that accommodate from 4-12 students. A full class can be accommodated together in the main library area, and this area is enough removed from other library spaces so that instruction can take place with little or no disturbance to or from other users. The end result is that three classes can be accommodated in the library simultaneously, with room left over for many individual students. The library has a very spacious entry, with ample room for display. There are two distinct "lounge seating" areas. And separate from the main circulation/service desk is a librarian reference desk, which places a librarian "where the action is," available and readily accessible to students. These two staff areas also make possible visual control of the entire library facility. The library furnishings are high-quality, in a Mission style that provides a very traditional yet comfortable interior. This library — as it was originally designed — was hailed as one of the best school libraries in Connecticut, perhaps in all of New England. [Editor's note: Since Rolf's experience with this project, the original Simsbury HS Library spaces have been modified and thus may invite new opinions as to the layout's current effectiveness and design]

One of the least successful—or perhaps I should say most disheartening projects (a project I would ask remain anonymous)—was a high school library where the furniture plan I developed, working closely with the head librarian and which very effectively facilitated the library program, was vetoed by the school's superintendent, because it made it difficult for him to use the space for conducting meetings. This occasional need was deemed more important than the day-to-day functioning of the library for students and faculty.

**DesignShare: In your opinion, identify and describe one school library that has really managed to 'get it right' in terms of design/planning/layout (etc).**

**Doug:**

I wish I could.

I think our [St. Peter library](#) was right for 15 years ago. I am impressed by the new [Minneapolis Public Library](#) – lots of small, intimate spaces within a grand space. I am anxious to see the new Winona High School library since it was designed with “Barnes & Noble” as a model and the media specialist, [Mary Alice Anderson](#), is a forward thinking person.

**Rolf:**

Here I refer again to the library at Simsbury, CT, High School as it was originally designed (prior to recent changes), and my remarks made above in question 2 apply to this question as well.

Although I am only relying on pictures I have seen and reports I have read, it is my impression that the designers who have renovated elementary school libraries in New York City through the [Robin Hood Foundation's Library Initiative](#) have gotten it right; they have achieved some very remarkable, exciting results, especially for facilities that are not very large, and have created some visually stimulating spaces for young children.

**DesignShare: There seems to be a tension today between the way we design, manage, and use libraries in traditional terms and what seems to be a call for change, for innovation, for re-thinking the entire concept of what a library is. Based on your experience, what is the right balance between tradition and innovation when it comes to protecting the core principles of a library?**

**Doug:**

Most professions, I am sure, go back and forth on this. For me, professionally, my mission has not changed since I started in library work over 25 years ago –

"Teaching people to effectively find and use information to meet their needs." For sure the tools have changed (print to electronic information sources), skill emphasis had shifted from finding to evaluating information, and the teaching role as opposed to the "providing" role of librarians has grown.

I'd also argue that some core values of librarianship are as important if not more important than ever: commitment to intellectual freedom, teaching respect for intellectual property; working toward information access for all citizens; the promotion of information as a basis for good decision-making; and that education is really about teaching people to teach themselves.

**Rolf:**

When it comes to school library design, I am wary of "tradition," because I think emphasizing tradition has kept us from implementing necessary and innovative change. For what, if any, reason should a school library be designed, managed, and used in traditional terms? (And what, exactly, is meant by "tradition" in this context?)

There is one library function that I suppose falls into this "traditional" category, and that is the role of the library program in promoting the love of reading. This is, and I hope will always be worth preserving, a vital part of all school library programs, especially at, but not limited to, the elementary level.

Aside from that, the 21st century school library must look beyond tradition to the future, to what is needed to help fulfill the educational mission, goals, and objectives of the school. Traditional library environments are primarily text-based, require learning the system from experts (librarians), and are constructed for individual use.

This "traditional" model is no longer appropriate.

**DesignShare: Should the library of the future be a 'sacred' space dedicated to honoring the book or a dynamic interactive space dedicated to honoring the student and community?**

**Doug:**

I would hope the library will be a sacred space dedicated to honoring those who use the library to meet whatever informational, educational, socialization and personal needs they might have. The libraries with the broadest mission will be those that will remain vital.

Let's face it. The Net Generation wants its information and entertainment in digital formats. Ours may well be the last generation to use cellulose-based information storage technology (paper).

**Rolf:**

It definitely must not be a "sacred" space dedicated to honoring the book—this sounds more like a definition of a book museum. Today's library is a learning place, not a warehouse space. And it must be a fluid environment, one that continually reinvents itself to remain relevant, that adapts to new knowledge of learning and new pedagogy.

The concept of the library as a hushed, quiet space, where all students study individually and silently, sitting up straight on uncomfortable, wooden chairs is a concept that should have long ceased to exist. Students have become accustomed to multimedia environments, working in groups, and multitasking.

Libraries must be spaces where multiple activities can take place simultaneously. And since there are many different learning styles, the library should offer as many different types of environments as possible—quiet study areas, group activity areas, spaces for individual and small group work, spaces for instruction, spaces where students can listen to music, and—dare I say it—spaces where food and drinks are allowed.

**DesignShare: Recently, we listened to a group of major urban superintendents discuss the growing concern that libraries in their district (no matter how well designed) rarely have more than a handful of kids in them. What are your recommendations to school designers to inspire more interest in library spaces by students and young people?**

**Doug:**



I'd again look at places where kids DO want to be and see what might be learned from those spaces.

To me, the coffee shop should guide us tell us kids want a social learning space. Online preferences tells me we need to give kids a lot of access to digital resources. Gyms and theaters indicated that libraries should be performance spaces where kids can share information, not just absorb it. And finally, looking at social networking sites and [YouTube](#), we need to make libraries knowledge production areas.

Quite frankly, I would also ask the superintendents to look carefully at their library staffing if their libraries are not being used. Are there kid-friendly, kid-knowledgeable professionals running their libraries who have figured out how to develop a wide range of ownership their programs.

I would bet dollars to doughnuts that the physical space itself has little to do with why kids might be staying away.

**Rolf:**

First of all, I would want to visit these libraries and decide for myself if they are truly well designed. I have seen many new school libraries, including some that have received architecture and design awards, that do not offer the kind of atmosphere in which kids would want to spend much time.

If a school library is truly an inviting, exemplary, 21st century facility that is not being used by students, I would want information about the size and quality of the school library staff. No matter how well-designed, no school library will attract kids for long without a dynamic staff and a program.

My recommendations:

- Have library staff and a library program in place before facility planning begins so that the design of the facility will meet program requirements;
- Get as much help as you can from an experienced, reputable school library facility design consultant—preventing one mistake can save the cost of the fees;
- Involve the stakeholders in the planning process—and don't forget or exclude the

students;

- Be adventurous, particularly in terms of providing flexible spaces and furnishings that are comfortable and ergonomically correct. Too many new school library interiors are far too conservative and dull;
- Recognize that the functions of a 21st century school library are complex, and as such, school libraries need to be carefully designed.

**DesignShare:** [One major US university has radically re-approached university design by essentially removing books from what had been their undergraduate library. In its place, the university created a state-of-the-art information center no longer dependent upon print materials.](#) In addition, with the advent of the [Sony Reader](#) and additional efforts by [Google](#) and others to make every book of the planet searchable on-line, do you see a day when most school libraries will begin moving away from storing huge numbers of books and dedicated spaces to stacks/bookcases in order to become more 'virtual' information centers?

**Doug:**

Much of this will depend not on technology, but on how well Google does in the courts with its "scan now, ask permission later" approach to copyright.

If intellectual property laws don't change and ownership of the 70% of books that are not in print but not in the public domain remains in question, I see a lot of information remaining accessible only in print form. I guess what I am saying is yes, libraries will become virtual information centers, but probably not as quickly as one might think.

And I always say, design for the technologies that are available NOW, not those just over the horizon. The horizon might be further away than you anticipate.

**Rolf:**

In school libraries that have well-planned 21st century programs, we are already witnessing this shift to some extent. Books are still needed and prevalent, but many books, especially nonfiction books on topics such as science and technology, go quickly out-of date and are, rightly so, being replaced by digital resources.

In terms of overall library space, I don't think it matters that much. If we reduce book collection size, we then have more space for technologies. I think the size of the book collection is an issue that each institution needs to address and attempt to arrive at a consensus of what's appropriate, and it is an issue that needs to be revisited frequently. There is no "one size fits all" solution, no definitive answer.

I've come up with a few points that I think are key regarding the future of school libraries and book collections:

- Considering the research that demonstrates the importance of school libraries vis-à-vis students' academic success and reading skills, and considering the constant growth of information and new technologies, school libraries and librarians are needed now more than ever.
- For the foreseeable future, a mix of print and non-print materials will be needed in the collection of resources. School libraries need to be the hub of new technologies and the place for books.
- Over the next five years, the size of print collections will undoubtedly either remain static or get smaller as we rely more heavily on digital information. But this will not, in turn, mean smaller school libraries. In fact, we should consider providing more space for instructional purposes.
- As much as possible we should be designing flexible spaces so that space required today for book storage can easily be converted for other purposes in the future.
- The book collections that do exist need to be relevant—what is really needed in terms of the curriculum—and students need to be taught the importance of using books in tandem with online information. The emphasis must be on the quality of the collection, not the quantity.

There is an ongoing debate I've been following regarding what is perceived by many in the profession as a significant disadvantage of relying too heavily on non-print sources. Some are referring to digital information as "fluid," and books as "permanent."

There is some real validity to this distinction. There is far less local control over the content of digital collections. Someone from outside the institution makes decisions, and a resource that is available today may disappear tomorrow. Teachers plan

curriculum around available resources, and it complicates matters when resources they have come to rely on are suddenly no longer available.

Unless this dilemma can be resolved, I think it is a good argument for maintaining strong, relevant book collections.

**DesignShare: This is for Doug, only. From reading your [Blue Skunk Blog](#), we've come to sense 2 significant elements weaving their way through all of your writing: a) Technology is a powerful agent for change but ultimately human interaction is far more powerful/dynamic; and b) Books matter and will always matter, and spaces for research, quiet reflection, and simple reading will always matter. If we are correct in noticing these biases of yours, what do they tell you about the way that we must re-think designing future library spaces?**

**Doug:**

Yes, I suppose these are my biases.

People can and will always be the most powerful factor in any equation – for change or for reactivity. I am reminded of a prediction from the mid 80s by a Department of Education staffer (I believe) who said that in the future poor kids will have technology and rich kids will have human teachers. Look today to see what socio-economic groups are being placed in front of computerized reading programs and what groups are getting small classes sizes and highly qualified reading teachers?

I believe books in whatever format they exist will always matter. There is some talk about a post-literate society in which most folks will only need to read enough to interpret simple signs and instructions and the reading longer works will be seen as a personal hobby much as enjoying opera is today.

But for the next 10 years or so, yes, books, literacy, and library spaces are important. And I am hoping that quiet reflection will remain a need of humans for a very long time.

**DesignShare: First, play devil's advocate with us. Make an argument that schools should get rid of dedicated library spaces and integrating their book collections into existing**

school spaces.

**Once done, make an argument for why schools should forever protect the book-oriented library no matter how far along we come in terms of technology.**

**Doug:**

In a rather cynical fashion, I believe I made the case for no physical library in my ["Letter from the Flat World Library Corporation."](#) There the argument is made not to integrate books into existing spaces but to eliminate them altogether.

The opposite case can be made from an economic standpoint that libraries are (and always have been) essentially a means to distribute information in a cost effective manner. Quite simply, it is cheaper to buy one book and share than it is to buy a copy for everyone. I worked this one over in a column called ["Common Sense Economy"](#).

At this point, I think we can still make a case for a "book oriented" library for developing good reading skills based on the arguments of Stephen Krashen and others who maintain that voluntary free reading is the best way for kids to improve their reading skills. And kids will only read voluntarily if they have access to a wide range of materials that are at an appropriate reading level that are on topics of interest to them. In other words, good library book collections.

**Rolf:**

It seems to me that any premise behind the argument that schools should integrate book collections into existing school spaces and get rid of dedicated library spaces is basically a shortsighted attempt to cut costs, and indicates a fundamentally flawed understanding of what a 21st century school library is all about.

A good school library is much more than a book repository; it should be the school's information hub, an environment that supports multiple learning activities for 100 per cent of the school's population.

The debate needs to focus on the question, "do we still need libraries as a physical

space (regardless of how book-oriented they may or may not be) and, if so, what should they look like and how should they serve the learning process," I remain convinced that we need school libraries more than ever.

The glut of information that keeps expanding overwhelms most people, and libraries and librarians are needed to help guide and teach students and teachers to cope. Also, an exemplary library program, with an emphasis on information fluency, is the one place where students can truly become equipped with the skills needed to become lifelong, continual learners.

Having said that, I would also like to say that I believe most classrooms should have book collections—to supplement library collections, not to replace them.

**DesignShare: Give 1 piece of advice to a young school designer looking ahead at a career in terms of planning school libraries.**

**Doug:**

Be very broad-minded about the functions of the school's library and get planners thinking less about designing an effective library, but an effective school with a library program that supports the school's goals.

**Rolf:**

Look to the future, not at the past; question what's been done before.

Remember that the facility must be based on the needs of the library program. Seek out the opinions of the stakeholders, especially those of the students and library media specialists.

Do not lose sight of the fact that your mission is to design a fully-functional learning environment, not an architectural monument.

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**Biographical Information:**

**Doug Johnson:**

Doug Johnson has been the Director of Media and Technology for the [Mankato Public Schools](#) since 1991 and has served as an adjunct faculty member of Minnesota State University, Mankato since 1990. His teaching experience has included work in grades K-12 in schools both here and in Saudi Arabia. He is the author of four books: [The Indispensable Librarian](#) (PDF questions that accompany the text's main ideas [here](#)), [The Indispensable Teacher's Guide to Computer Skills](#), [Teaching Right from Wrong in the Digital Age](#) and [Machines are the Easy Part: People are the Hard Part](#). His regular columns appear in Library Media Connection, Leading & Learning magazines and on the Education World website, and his articles have appeared in over forty books and periodicals. Doug has conducted workshops and given presentations for over 130 organizations throughout the United States as well as in Malaysia, Kenya, Thailand, Germany, Qatar, Canada, Chili, the UAE and Australia and has held a variety of leadership positions in state and national organizations, including ISTE and AASL. Finally, Doug is the author of the respected [Blue Skunk Blog](#) that analyzes library and education related issues.

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**Rolf Erikson:**

Rolf Erikson has been a school library facility consultant for fifteen years and has consulted on over eighty projects for public and independent schools, both in the U.S. and internationally. He has thirty years experience as a school library media specialist at all levels K-12, including sixteen years as school library director at [Minuteman Regional High School](#) in Lexington, Massachusetts, and nine years as director of library and audiovisual services at the Frankfurt International School in Oberursel, Germany. His professional experience also includes K-12 classroom teaching. He has an M.S. in instructional technology from the University of Wisconsin-Stout and a B.A. in art education from Concordia College, Moorhead, Minnesota. He has presented workshops on school library design for national, regional, and state professional library organizations, and has taught courses on school library facilities design at the graduate level. He is co-author of [Designing A School Library Media Center for the Future](#), published by the American Library Association in 2001, and he has recently completed the 2nd edition which will be

published in the spring of 2007.

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