

# **LIVING IN THE LAND OF “AND”**

## **TRENDS IN 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICE**

### **Prepared for the Anne Arundel County Public Library**

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If a poll was conducted on the streets of America, it is highly likely that there would be broad agreement with the notion that public libraries have changed over the course of recent decades. Most would cite computers, technology, and the Internet as the source of much of the change and more than a few respondents would question the ongoing viability of one of our nation’s oldest institutions.

Some, primarily those who are current active users of public libraries, might offer a view of public libraries that have changed over the years to offer new formats of materials (such as audiobooks, DVDs, e-books) and services (such as public access to computers and Wi-Fi). A small number, primarily librarians and those closely connected with libraries such as library trustees, might venture into territory that includes the library as a center of community life, the library as a source of programming and hands-on learning, and the library as an epicenter of creativity and innovation.

In short, the public is most aware of what public libraries have been. They are somewhat familiar with what public libraries are, and they are largely uninformed about what libraries are becoming.

In truth, public libraries are “living in a land of AND.” They continue to offer the legacy services that people have come to expect and enjoy even as they embark on new ventures that are positioning them to serve the public well for decades to come. What is the future of the public library? Is it an institution on its last legs or one that is becoming even more relevant than it has been in the past?

A 2014 publication entitled ***RISING TO THE CHALLENGE: Re-Envisioning Public Libraries***<sup>1</sup> is widely regarded as the most influential recent look at the future of the American public library. ***Rising to the Challenge*** summarized the emerging role of public libraries as encompassing three concepts. They are:

- People
- Place
- Platform

**PEOPLE** - The public library is a hub of civic engagement, fostering new relationships and strengthening the human capital of the community. Librarians are actively engaged in the community. They connect individuals to a vast array of local and national

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<sup>1</sup> Aspen Institute Dialogue on Public Libraries, *Rising to the Challenge: Re-Envisioning Public Libraries*, Washington, D.C.: The Aspen Institute, October 2014.

resources and serve as neutral conveners to foster civic health. They facilitate learning and creation for children and adults alike.

**PLACE** - The public library is a welcoming space for a wide range of purposes—reading, communicating, learning, playing, meeting and getting business done. Its design recognizes that people are not merely consumers of content but creators and citizens as well. Its physical presence provides an anchor for economic development and neighborhood revitalization, and helps to strengthen social bonds and community identity. The library is also a virtual space where individuals can gain access to information, resources and all the rich experiences the library offers. In the creative design of its physical and virtual spaces the public library defines what makes a great public space.

**PLATFORM** - The public library is user-centered. It provides opportunities for individuals and the community to gain access to a variety of tools and resources with which to discover and create new knowledge. The platform enables the curation and sharing of the community’s knowledge and innovation. A great library platform is a “third place” —an interactive entity that can facilitate many people operating individually and in groups—and supports the learning and civic needs of the community.

Following are a few of the ways that these concepts are manifesting themselves in public libraries across America in 2017. Maintaining the base of existing users who expect “traditional library services” while venturing into new territory that builds the next generation of library users is challenging to say the least. The TRENDS that follow are not a matter of EITHER/OR. Libraries are faced with offering physical resources, which have proven to be far more resilient than pundits have predicted, while at the same time providing access to a broad array of downloadable and streamed content. Public libraries are providing quiet spaces for individual/solitary use while at the same time creating spaces that are conducive to group study and collaborative activities. They are retooling their reference staff to perform new tasks in response to ubiquitous sources of information and misinformation. The public library of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is “living in the land of AND” adding new layers of service onto those familiar to our parents and grandparents.

## **TREND 1**

### **SHIFT FROM PASSIVE TO ACTIVE (INSTITUTIONAL)**

#### **PASSIVE >>>> ACTIVE**

- In many communities, libraries are becoming “Third Places” (places that are not home, not school or work, but a “third” important place where people gather and interact).
- Libraries are becoming important components in quality of life. Richard Harwood of the Harwood Institute has observed that “Healthy communities need an abundance of social gatherings.” Libraries are uniquely qualified to serve as a neutral gathering place in our communities. We speak of your church and my

church, your school and my school, but of OUR library. The public library belongs to all in our communities equally.

- Maker spaces, early learning centers, job centers, and a host of other “hands-on” opportunities are making libraries places that are known as places of creativity and innovation. They are changing from places where you GET stuff into places where you DO stuff.

## **TREND 2**

### **SHIFT FROM INDIVIDUAL USE TO GROUP USE (USER)**

**STUDY >>>> LEARNING**

**SOLITARY >>>> COLLABORATIVE**

- While many individuals still come to libraries to find a place to read or study individually, group use is growing. Students seek space to work on collaborative projects. Community organization seek places where they can organize, plan, research and discuss content of interest to them. Ironically, the public library as a public forum goes back to the origins of the public library movement. We still find libraries in the northeast that have “athenaeum” as part of their names.

## **TREND 3**

### **SHIFT FROM PROVIDER TO COACH (STAFF)**

**PROVIDER >>>> COACH**

- The role of professional librarians has changed as information (and misinformation) has become ubiquitous. The old story of Willie Sutton, the bank robber, is apt. When asked why he robbed banks, Sutton replied “because that’s where the money is.” In the same way, libraries used to be “where the information was.” Today, information is everywhere and the role of the reference librarian has transitioned from providing the right answer to coaching individuals and helping them determine where and how to find and validate authoritative information.

## **TREND 4**

### **SHIFT FROM PHYSICAL RESOURCES TO ELECTRONIC RESOURCES (RESOURCES)**

**PHYSICAL >>>> VIRTUAL/DIGITAL**

- In spite of decades of dire warnings that libraries would become obsolete, library door counts remain very strong and, in many communities, the public library is among the busiest places in town. Part of this is the enduring strength of the portable, print-on-paper book. While e-books grew in popularity for five or six years, recent research shows that print remains the preferred choice (by a

considerable margin – 70% print sales vs. 30% digital sales). Although certain types of books (reference books for example) are disappearing, the demand for general fiction, non-fiction, and particularly materials for children remains extremely strong. Again, libraries are “living in the land of AND;” they must provide access to both print and digital/virtual resources.

## **TREND 5**

### **SHIFT FROM TRANSACTIONAL-BASED SERVICES TO TRANSFORMATIONAL-BASED SERVICES (EVALUATION) TRANSACTIONAL >>>> TRANSFORMATIONAL**

- In the minds of many, traditional library services have been based on transactions such as the number of items circulated, the number of questions answered and the number of books on the shelf. The value of 21<sup>st</sup> century libraries is increasingly being measured in terms of the impact that the institution has in the lives of people. We are moving from evaluating libraries in terms of inputs and outputs to attempts to measure outcomes.

## **Evaluating the Public Library**

### **Inputs**

- **Number of Staff**
- **Size of Collection**
- **Number of Hours Open**







### **Outputs**

- **Circulation of Materials**
- **Number of Visits**
- **Number of Computer Sessions**

### **Outcomes**

- **Improvement in skills**
- **Positive change in attitude**
- **Knowledge gained**
- **Behavioral changes**
- **Change in status (e.g., received GED, got a job)**
- **Change in life conditions (e.g., better nutrition)**

An **outcome** is a change in a target audience's **skills, attitudes, knowledge, behaviors, status, or life condition** brought about by experiencing a program. Examine the following examples:

 <p><b>SKILLS</b> <i>Girl Scouts can identify local birds by sight and name.</i></p>	 <p><b>BEHAVIOR</b> <i>Children read for pleasure over three hours per week.</i></p>
 <p><b>ATTITUDES</b> <i>Girl Scouts no longer think science is boring.</i></p>	 <p><b>STATUS</b> <i>At-risk students using educational materials on library computers earn GED and improve salary and job prospects.</i></p>
 <p><b>KNOWLEDGE</b> <i>Girl Scouts know what local birds eat and what predators they face.</i></p>	 <p><b>LIFE CONDITIONS</b> <i>West Dakota residents stop smoking after using improved access to reliable, understandable medical information.</i></p>

Outcomes develop over time. Note that:

- **short-term** outcomes are likely to be changes in skills, attitudes, and knowledge
- **medium-term** often include changes in behavior and decision making
- **long-term** outcomes may involve changes in status or life conditions

All of these trends impact the ways in which we think about library facilities. Library facilities facilitate. They should be designed to enable or facilitate results or ends that are highly desired by the people who fund them. What does this mean for Anne Arundel County Public Library's buildings? It is important to know how many libraries are needed, how large they should be, and where they should be placed; however, it is arguably even more important to know what the buildings will facilitate.