

# The Learning Center

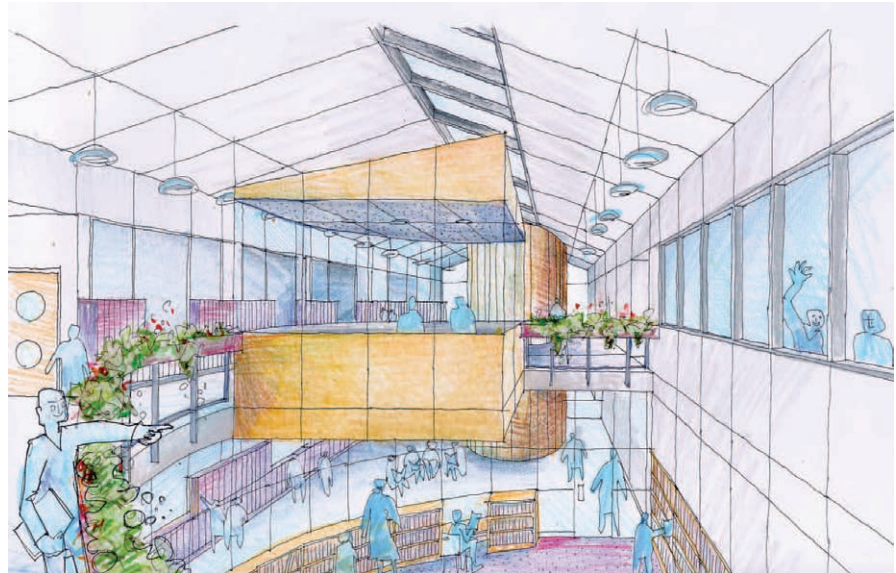
By Laura Wernick, AIA, REFP, LEED AP

*Since the second century, libraries have been esteemed as keepers of the flame of knowledge and culture. At the stone Library of Celcus, constructed in Turkey in 1100 A.D., for example, 15,000 documents were kept safe from the elements and other destructive forces such as rodents. In places like Celcus, the knowledge of Greek philosophy, Roman technology, and the math and science of the Arabic speaking people were protected and maintained for future generations. The ancient library there bore the carved inscriptions Wisdom, Knowledge, Intelligence and Virtue. The inscriptions reflect an understanding that this is more than mere collection. They refer to society's aspirations to preserve and sustain the keys to human potential.*

This tradition is still deeply ingrained in our experience today. The dual symbols of *Patience* and *Fortitude*, the two lions guarding the main branch of the New York Public Library in Manhattan speak to this ideal. The enormous reading room in the heart of the metropolis suggests the importance of intellectual pursuit, insight and creativity.

Whether in New York City or in the middle of America, the public library represents a key ingredient of the American dream: free access to the key works of our collective society. However, with the ease and accessibility of information through an onslaught of various multimedia modes, the role of the library has abruptly changed and not everyone has come to grips with it.

No longer the keepers of the flame in a stone crucible, libraries are evolving to keep up with the times. Many public libraries have refocused not only to ensure access to information, but also to instruct how to access that information and



how to discern what is credible. Libraries are expanding their role as community-wide resource centers as well as maintaining their stature as places for reflection, sharing, and learning. Shelves filled with rows upon rows of books are no longer the only emblems of the library. Their role is much more proactive, providing public access to a range of

media as well as live access to lectures and community meetings. The public library in downtown Seattle, for example, with its community spaces, galleries, resource centers, and large comfortable reading areas has become a model that other communities are emulating.

Similarly, college and university libraries have maintained their

relevance through innovation. All across the country, the term “learning commons” has become familiar parlance. Endless bookshelves are going into hiding from the public view and into off-site archiving centers. They have been replaced by spaces for sharing, teaching and working.

According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Xavier University in Cincinnati is one of more than three-dozen universities to have created learning center/commons. The University is in the process of completing a \$28 million Learning Common to replace its library. The former library is now being used as an archival facility for older books.<sup>1</sup>

Harvard University is also reducing the amount of books and journals it gets each year. According to library officials, the number of physical volumes added per year fell from 429,000 in 2004-05 to 349,000 in 2008-09. The number of digital items, including text, images, and audio files, soared from 1.2 million in 2003-04 to 12.4 million last year. During that period, electronic resources — journals, books, and databases — rose from 6,058 to 370,696.<sup>2</sup>

While accessing information is still at the core of the college library, in the new incarnation, learning commons also have media-rich meeting rooms and classrooms, comfortable, informal gathering spaces and often, cafés. Now, in addition to their traditional roles, librarians assist students in learning how to conduct effective on-line research. While the finding and gathering of information is still critical, with information so readily available through electronic media, libraries today are reshaping themselves as centers for students to learn how to analyze and interpret



information, in addition to their mission as information portals.<sup>3</sup>

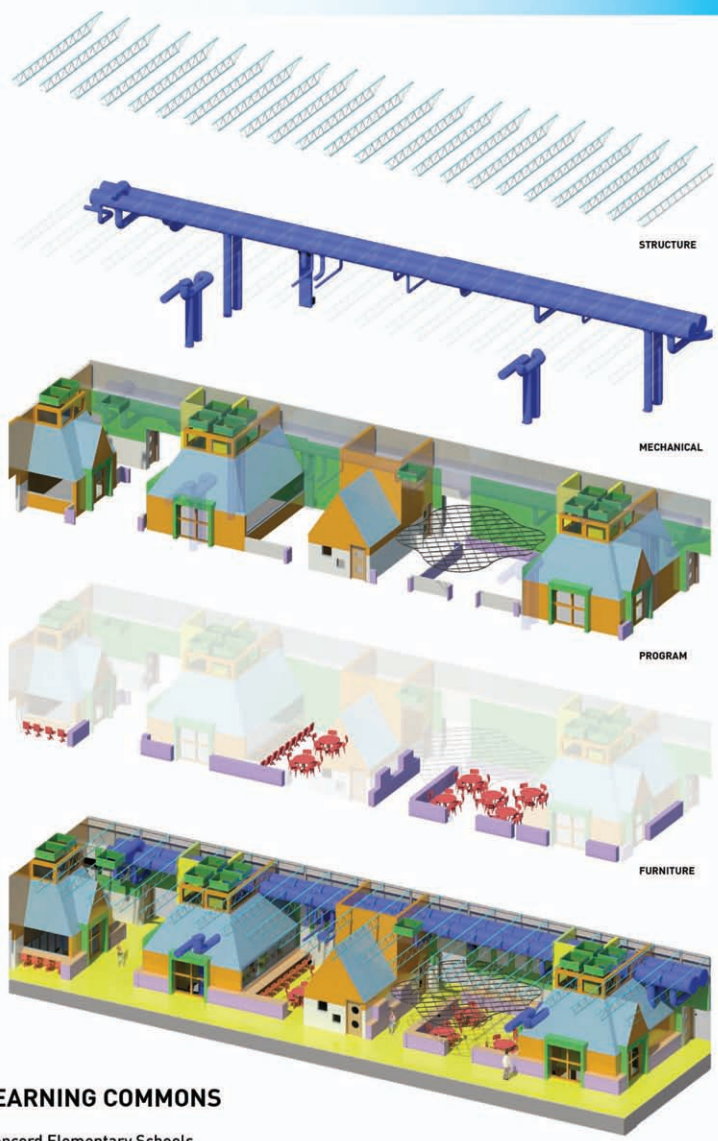
The one library that has fiercely resisted transformational change is the K-12 school library. This is very understandable. In order to instill a love of learning, such an essential component of the school library’s role, books are critical. The objects themselves are essential to a much larger extent than at a public or col-

lege level library. Children’s books, often with lavish and enticing illustrations, are a magnet for young minds. As children grow, having options from the “Little House” series to the Percy Jackson or Mysterious Benedict Society books helps develop long-term readers. Having books in schools also insures that children without books in the home or without access to the

<sup>1</sup> Foster, Andrea L., “ Strains and Joys Color Mergers Between Libraries and Tech Units”, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1/18/08.

<sup>2</sup> “Harvard’s Paper Cuts,” *The Boston Globe*, 5/24/10

<sup>3</sup> According to a recent study, *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources*, 2005, OCLC (Online Computer Library Center), 80% of respondents said the search engine would be their first choice the next time they need a source for information. 65% of college students use their college/university library at least monthly, with 14 percent using it daily. College students are more likely to use a search engine to find information (89%) than visit a library web site (2%).



**LEARNING COMMONS**

Concord Elementary Schools  
Concord, NH



public library still have contact with reading materials. The thought of reducing the quantity of books, the size, or the centrality of the school library strikes a note of fear in every elementary educator’s heart.

Yet increasingly, we are seeing harbingers of change. Recently, the *Boston Globe* reported, “Cushing Academy, the nation’s oldest co-ed boarding school hopes to be a model for 21st century learning by getting rid of its entire library print collection. The 144-year-old school, west of Ashburnham, MA, is giving away

or tossing its 20,000 book collection for 18 digital readers, enhanced electronic databases, flat-screen TVs, and laptop-equipped study cubicles – at a cost of \$500,000.”<sup>4</sup>

Cushing Headmaster James Tracy explained that the library is the “nicest place on campus” and that bookshelves wasted precious space that could be put to better use.”

While this may be an extreme case, the discussion about “re-balancing” of books and technology is real and ongoing at the K-12 level,

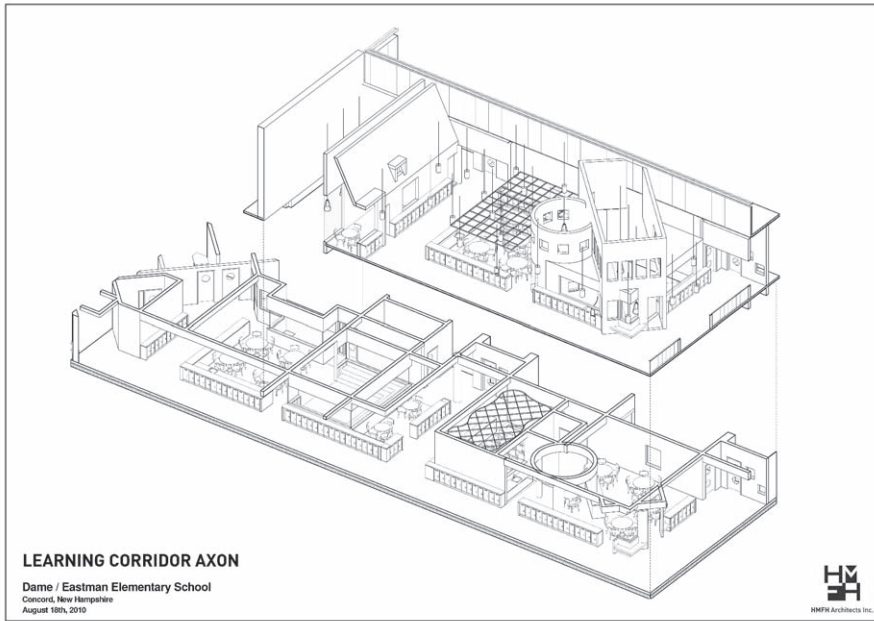
especially in a time where the cost of every square foot of space in a school is being carefully analyzed. Librarians are sensitive to the reality that their jobs have moved from arranging and cataloging to “information literacy, curriculum support, and teacher/librarian cooperation,” according to Carol A. Kelly (Quality School Libraries in a 2.0 World, Massachusetts ASCD, Perspectives, Fall 2009).

This debate has been very intense in the elementary schools in Concord, New Hampshire. This historic city on the edge of the Merrimac River is in the midst of designing three new elementary schools. When the building project is complete in 2012, 85% of the city’s K-5 students will be in new facilities that will serve the community through the better part of the 21st century. The community and its educational leaders are determined to get it right. While there is a strong respect for continuity and tradition in a city whose main street is lined with 19th century buildings, there is a growing consensus that the traditional library does not represent the best use of the taxpayers’ dollars, nor does it provide the flexibility that educators will need in the years to come.

Instigated by the system’s superintendent, Christine Rath and a team of teachers and administrators, the discussions have probed the very nature of the future of K-12 learning. Dr. Rath points to several pressures that are shaping the discussion, “First, learning is a collaborative process. Students need to work together and educators need to work together to achieve the best outcomes. There need to be places that support collaborative learning and those places cannot be remote from the teacher.”

She adds that learning is dynamic and fluid; educators and students need a variety of flexible spaces to support the range of activities that

<sup>4</sup> “Overeager futurism at Cushing”, *The Boston Globe*, 09/07/09



take place within a learning environment and these spaces will most likely need to change over time.

“Too often, I will see a small group of students working together sitting on the floor outside of their classroom,” says Rath. “This is valuable work. Those students need small group meeting areas with internet and multi-media access. They need project spaces where hands-on activities might be ongoing over the course of days or even weeks. They need story-telling, presentation and performance space, and they need research space and a place to learn how to do research. Access to technology must be seamless and ubiquitous throughout all of these spaces.”

Dr. Rath also believes that these spaces should be immediately accessible to the educator both for ease of access and for ease of supervision. Finally, literacy is and will continue to be a fully integrated component of all learning.

“Reading is a daily activity,” she says. “Books that have traditionally been located in the library need to be dispersed so that they are readily accessible to students in the classroom and not limited to once-a-week access remote from the classroom.”

Dialogue has been active and ongoing, but a plan for the schools has emerged that addresses the educator’s vision and may well serve as a model for other communities.

Each of the three schools has a two-story classroom academic wing. But rather than the traditional rows of CR flanking a double-loaded corridor, the classrooms all open onto a 30-foot-wide, two-story-high learning commons. The learning commons contains multiple project spaces, media/performance space that will seat students from two classrooms, as well as a storytelling area. It will contain bookshelves, display areas and storage cabinets. There is also space for reading and other support specialists in the learning commons. Wireless technology will be available throughout.

Within the learning commons, there is also a small, enclosed traditional library space that contains several hundred books and can seat one class. Without losing sight of the traditional role of the library, the role has been rebalanced.

Teachers will no longer be constrained by the four walls of their classrooms. The learning commons has enough space for multiple classes to participate in a special activity,

for a small group to undertake a research project, or for a single student to find a quiet spot for reading. Because every classroom opens onto the learning commons and also has a window opening onto the commons, direct supervision will be achievable from the classroom.

Two of the new Concord schools are K-5, and the third school is Pre-K through 2. In each case, the classrooms of the older students are on the second floor. Because the commons is two stories high, students not only have their own project spaces on the second floors, but also can see and be aware of the activities occurring on the lower floor. The entire wing will contain wireless access, allowing all grade levels independent access to online research and activities as needed.

The learning commons will open up new possibilities for the teachers as well as parents and after-school use by the community. Parents will be encouraged to participate in or supervise activities taking place in the learning commons. After-school programs will also have access to the space without interfering with the school day classrooms.

The elementary school learning commons will be an experiment for the school system and the entire community. As the 21st century evolves, Concord is confident that the learning commons will be a special resource that will enable new ways of learning and collaboration among students, faculty and the entire community. ■

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