

# SCHOOL

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## Not to Be Shelved

WHILE ADVANCES IN TECHNOLOGY HAVE CAUSED SOME TO PREDICT THE DEMISE OF THE BOOK, LIBRARIES ARE MORE THAN READING ROOMS.

by DAVID L. GOODALE

**I**N THE LAST 20 YEARS, K-12 library design has seen a number of dramatic projections — including the eventual obsolescence of the institution, and, more commonly, the phasing-out of books.

As library architects, and as citizens with a point of view, we suggest that some forces make for continuity in library design, and others will drive change.

### 1. THE RESILIENCE OF BOOKS

The library is a comprehensive site of cultural history. Those who have spent idle days in libraries will attest that browsing for knowledge or pleasure is not a linear act (assignment, search topics, keywords,

scanning pages for data). It is a physical, three-dimensional journey that involves cross-territorial and time travel, random samplings of words and illustrations,

side-by-side comparisons and such tangible qualities as heft, binding, texture, scent, typeface and typesetting.

A library is not a replaceable hard-copy vault for “data.” It is a living collection of artifacts that miniaturizes the entire universe while retaining an imprint of its amazing physical diversity. For students of all ages, it is the delight of this sensate universe that is magical, seductive; that opens the gateway to the power of learning in ways that digitized media does not.

### LIBRARIES/ MEDIA CENTERS

As the public library continues to diminish, the K-12 library remains a vital site to offer as broad a swath of knowledge as possible. And — because discovery is far more empowering than being fed — maximizing the “labyrinthine” journey of library stacks is integral to a successful education and a diverse democracy. In this same vein, planning for ample display bookshelves near the library entry is an integral invitation for students and learners to “test the waters” of a theme or topic.

How many books? More!

For example, California’s 18-books/student guideline is below the national average of 26 books/student, both numbers being determined more by politics than by human development.

## 2. A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS

In a library, one is among a “community of learners,” who are there to grow broader and deeper, to be challenged by new resources, whether books, digital media, scrawled notes or class assignments.

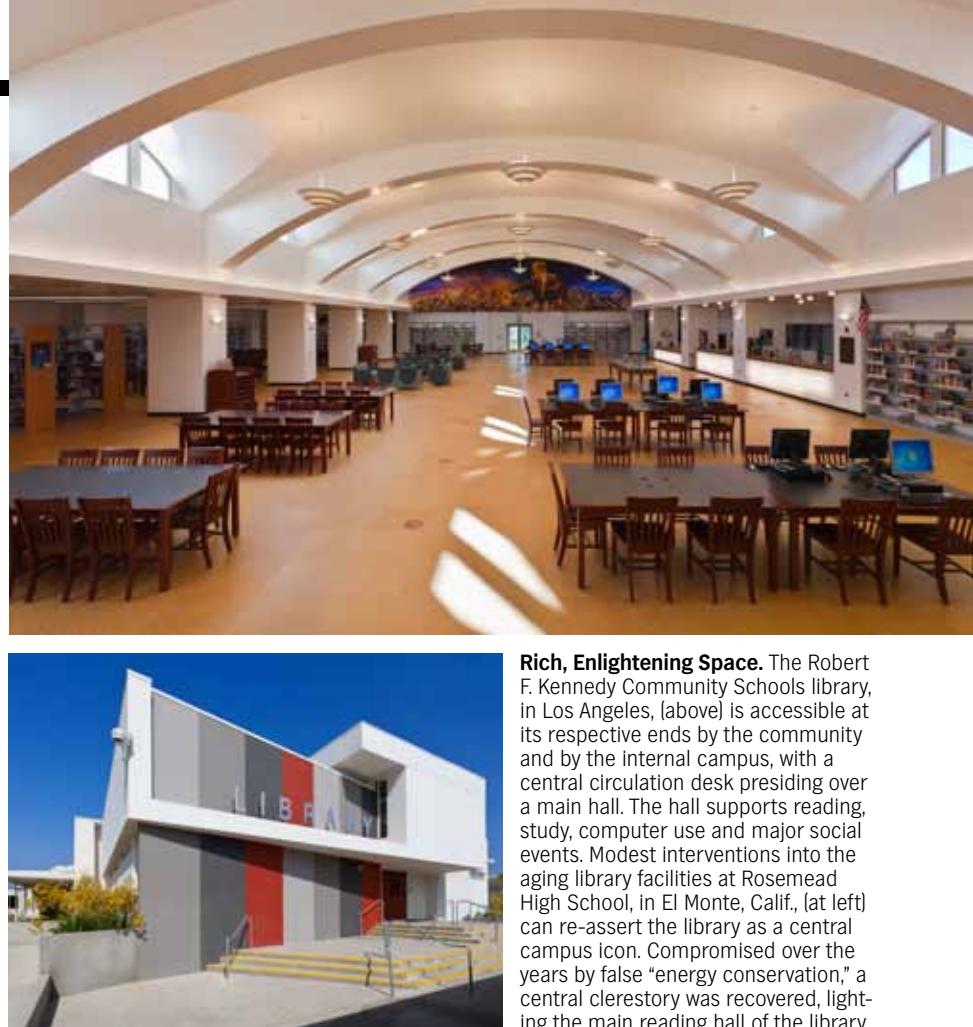
As free public space for social gathering disappears — especially for young people — the role of the library as a social center becomes increasingly important. The K-12 library needs to provide both study/retreat areas and venues where interaction is both accepted and promoted — including narrative areas for young children and acoustically isolated areas for group study.

A corollary of this more social library is that it invites after-hours parental use — both to support their children and to extend their own learning. In both of our libraries for the Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools, after-hours community access is enabled via sidewalk entries discrete from campus entries. In the case of the high school library, this meant placing the circulation desk at the center of the reading hall, resulting in one gate/detection system at the public end of the hall and a second at the internal/quadrangle end. With lines-of-sight maintained in this open hall, LAUSD found the distances a wholly acceptable trade-off to welcome in both students and community.

## 3. TECHNOLOGY, PROGRAMMATIC CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUPPORT

The trend for libraries to be replaced by hardware-dominated media Centers has somewhat diminished with the realization that media hardware is increasingly individually owned, battery-powered and portable. Yet, transitionally, K-12 libraries, especially in under-resourced neighborhoods, need to be a first portal into technology and computer use, providing physical hardware, networks, Wi-Fi connection and focused areas for personal assistance.

Continued technological adjustments are inevitable, as are changes/opportunities in program (ebb and flow in computer vs. free study areas; parent literacy areas; iconic cultural programs). The Robert F. Kennedy



**Rich, Enlightening Space.** The Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools library, in Los Angeles, (above) is accessible at its respective ends by the community and by the internal campus, with a central circulation desk presiding over a main hall. The hall supports reading, study, computer use and major social events. Modest interventions into the aging library facilities at Rosemead High School, in El Monte, Calif., (at left) can re-assert the library as a central campus icon. Compromised over the years by false “energy conservation,” a central clerestory was recovered, lighting the main reading hall of the library.

Community Schools 4-12 library epitomizes the kind of flexible infrastructure required to support these changes. A raised floor system facilitates space planning re-configuration across the entire library, provides healthful under-floor, displacement-ventilation air delivery and provides acoustical benefit throughout the library with its sustainable cork finish. Given the large footprint of the library (15,500 square feet), 10 clerestory windows were employed to bring daylight into the study/media hall at its center, with mechanical darkening shades. Finally, this library provides important cultural context, including murals by Judy Baca at each end, on the life of Robert F. Kennedy, and a future media/research room with full-height touch-screen wall, used as a teaching tool to promote social justice and to provide insight on the life of Robert F. Kennedy.

In a similar vein of anticipating programmatic growth and change; for our competition-winning Prototype Academic Building for the Los Angeles Unified School District, accommodation of a single building to a range of repurposing was the key com-

petition charge — with the building being able to morph to classrooms, labs, multi-purpose rooms or libraries (of various sizes and programs) with a minimum of hard construction disruption. Library adaptability to flexibility will remain the rule.

## 4. THE ICONIC CENTER

For reasons noted earlier, in both new construction and renovation, the library deserves to be the premier expressive element of a school. This doesn’t require extravagant budget as it does intent and focus — to engage, invite and delight.

The K-12 library is mostly a voluntary experience. For the experience to be a rich contributor to a student’s education, it must offer a full complement: a universe of books, social encouragement, exposure to technology, flexibility to change, a convincing cultural context and an iconic presence that makes a convincing assertion: Something important is happening here. 

**> David L. Goodale** is Design principal with Gonzalez Goodale Architects, based in Pasadena, Calif.