



Hannah

Libraries Tout Role as 'Social Infrastructure'

Library system leaders in two of Ohio's large cities and an architect who works with them discussed Wednesday how they've redesigned their buildings and changed the way they use them to meet the needs of their users and encourage social cohesion.

Columbus Metropolitan Library CEO Patrick Losinski, Dayton Metro Library Executive Director Tim Kambitsch and architect Jonathan Moody of the firm Moody Nolan addressed the topic at a Columbus Metropolitan Club forum moderated by Ohio library Council Executive Director Michelle Francis. Both the Dayton and Columbus systems have embarked on major renovations and replacements of their facilities in recent years.

The panelists described striving for openness in the design of new and renovated libraries, both in terms of being welcoming to all comers and of physical spaces that are open, that put activities in the library on display and that extend outward from the building to connect visitors to nearby parks or other amenities.

"From a physical standpoint, I think we all have a memory of some librarian shushing us," said Nolan. "They historically had been kind of closed and dark and quiet."

In designing Columbus' new Martin Luther King library branch, Nolan tried to recreate the appearance of a front porch, as seen on all the houses one sees while driving down Long Street toward the branch.

Kambitsch said Dayton incorporated "opportunity spaces" into its new facilities for use by social services or community organizations, not just for an afternoon but for weeks or months at a time. "Think of it as a nonprofit incubator space," he said.

He said libraries' value as a hub for gathering and social services was "quite evident" in the wake of the recent Dayton tornadoes.

"It's a space where people feel comfortable ... they are seen as the Switzerland of social service agencies. There's not this, 'The library is invading my turf by hosting this meeting' And their clients feel comfortable coming because they appreciate and trust the libraries," Kambitsch said.

Losinski said this shift in use of libraries is a response to visitors' needs, and does not represent any kind of a shift away from mainstay offerings.

"Our book circulation remains steady, it's about 15 million ... But we all know that the middle class in this country is probably bearing most of the brunt of the changes that we're seeing in society. And they are coming into our libraries many times desperate for services and not knowing exactly where to turn," he said.

Losinski described libraries as the type of institutions that provide "social infrastructure," borrowing a phrase from *Palaces for the People*, a book by Eric Klinenberg. He referenced the book's section on the 1995 Chicago heat wave that resulted in hundreds of deaths. Neighborhoods with the fewest deaths had a strong presence of such social infrastructure.

The library chiefs mentioned two other indicators of a library's connection to community.

Losinski said the hopes the Columbus' system had for a plaza outside the new Dublin Branch were fulfilled on a recent weekend when he saw it was full of teenagers using it as the backdrop for their homecoming pictures.

Said Kambitsch, "One thing I've been saying we should be tracking is, how many kids are leaving the library crying ... wanting to stay, and their parents are kind of dragging them out the door?"

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[A video recording of this forum is available online.](#)



Ohio Library Council's Executive Director Michelle Francis moderates the Columbus Metropolitan Club forum with panel members (from left): Pat Losinski, Columbus Metropolitan Library; Jonathan Moody, Moody Nolan Architects; and Tim Kambitsch, Dayton Metro Library.