

VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF THE BALDWIN PUBLIC LIBRARY BUILDING

The Baldwin Public Library wishes to undertake a building project that will provide it with a well-designed, forward-looking, technologically advanced, and visually exciting space to carry out innovative library services in the 21st century.

History and Future

In early 2014, the Baldwin Public Library and the City of Birmingham proposed a comprehensive renovation and expansion of the Library building, a proposal that was rejected at the polls. Now, the Baldwin Library is proposing to continue to live, for the most part, within the footprint of its current physical structure. Since Baldwin will continue to use that structure, Baldwin needs to update it so that it can better accommodate current and future library services. In general, the Library wishes to play to the building's strengths, centering traditional, quiet, reflective activities in the Tudor arts and crafts structure designed by Marcus Burrowes in 1927, and using the modernist Gunnar Birkerts Addition, designed in 1981, to house active and collaborative activities.

We see the work proceeding in three phases:

- Phase 1: A renovation of the Adult Services section of the Library, concentrating on the main floor of the Birkerts Addition, but including some modifications to the 1927 building. This phase will involve no external construction. We will reallocate space; improve the layout of shelving and seating; create activity and collaboration hubs; establish small group study rooms; and promote technological access to information.
- Phase 2: A renovation of the Youth Room, which might involve external construction.
- Phase 3: A renovation of the public entrance, lobby, and Circulation Department, which might involve external construction.

We hope to complete Phase 1 within two to three years. Then we will consider the future of Phases 2 and 3.

Vision of the public library over the next five years

The Baldwin Library has always attempted to be in the forefront of new library services. Through a series of focus groups, community forums, community surveys, library benchmark studies, and research studies of the professional literature, Baldwin has identified many community needs and wants and has envisioned what the library of the future will be like. Among the documents that Baldwin has examined is the Aspen Institute report *Rising to the Challenge: Re-Envisioning Public Libraries*, which is a distillation of current thinking about the library of the future: <http://csreports.aspeninstitute.org/documents/AspenLibrariesReport.pdf>

Public libraries need to align their services, as well as their buildings, to the goals of their communities. In Baldwin's case, this means serving a well-educated, fairly affluent,

technologically savvy clientele, demographically somewhat older than the average American community. Baldwin strives not only to provide the services its citizens want, but also to enhance their user experience, both in the library building and online.

Baldwin's vision aligns with two goals established in the Library's 2010 strategic plan:

- Focus on fresh, dynamic services and programs that meet Library users' changing needs.
- Adapt the existing facility for more flexible use and employ technology more effectively in order to improve internal operating efficiency and better serve Library patrons.

It also aligns with three goals set by the Birmingham City Commission in 2010:

- Be innovative and responsive in how services are provided to the community.
- Support the vitality of both the residential and business communities.
- Continue to be proactive with infrastructure maintenance programs and reinvestment in cost-effective improvements to roads, sewers, water mains, and public facilities.

As daily experience shows us clearly, public libraries are no longer primarily storehouses of physical artifacts, but rather:

- Gateways to information in all formats
- Laboratories—places to experiment and innovate
- Learning commons—spaces for collaboration and sharing

As such, public library buildings should include zones that encourage different types of learning. Among these zones are:

- Quiet, reflective spaces
- Active areas, conducive to collaboration and sharing
- Small group meeting and study rooms, with presentation capabilities
- Social spaces—such as a commons, an exhibit space, and a café
- “Touch points,” where users come into direct contact with library services—for example, a staff service desk or a touch screen with library event and location information

The Aspen Institute report envisions a number of roles for the library of the future. Public libraries must strive to encourage entrepreneurial learners, the creators of knowledge. The buildings in which libraries are housed need to foster an environment that promotes learning and the access of information, no matter how the information is stored. Staff is responsible for curating the Library's collections and for being prepared to guide, as needed, the learning experience, thereby helping the public achieve useful and productive outcomes.

The Baldwin Library requires a blended design, one that accommodates traditional stacks and quiet spaces, as well as vibrant collaboration spaces. The building must be sufficiently flexible to accommodate the changes that will inevitably come over the years. In this rapidly changing world, it is, in fact, impossible to know for sure what will happen more than five years out, but

Baldwin needs to make sure that it can at least accommodate how people are using technology at the current time and how we believe they will use it in the near future.

Translating that vision into Baldwin's physical structure

To achieve the goals mentioned above, Baldwin wishes to focus its proposed building improvements, throughout all phases of the project, in the following categories. While Baldwin is providing a list of specific objectives, that list should not be considered prescriptive. Baldwin is eager to entertain any and all innovative and creative solutions to the challenge of designing a "library of the future" in a cost-effective manner. Baldwin is also eager to see environmentally friendly materials and methods used in any building project.

- Freshen the interior (new carpeting, updated furniture, coordinated color and design).
- Redesign the shelving (if possible, lower the height of existing shelving; determine the correct size of the physical collection; change the configuration of the shelving to allow easier browsing).
- Improve lighting, acoustics, seating, and the feeling of openness in order to foster discussion and collaboration.
- Design an interior where users feel comfortable and can easily find their way around (improve the layout; install effective signage; use print and electronic aids to guide people; make all newly designed areas ADA-accessible).
- Expand and update technology (determine the correct number of public computers; move the computer lab to a more visible and usable area; install a suitable Adult Services Desk; offer up-to-date technology; consider a digital creation space).
- Install as many small group study/collaboration rooms as possible, equipped with appropriate technology and presentation equipment.
- Design flexible spaces since libraries and library use will inevitably continue to change.

In Phase 1, specifically, Baldwin intends to:

- Focus primarily on the main floor of the Birkerts Addition.
- Ensure that any work done in Phase 1 will be consistent with future building plans.
- Leave largely intact those areas of the Adult Services section which have been recently renovated and work well, such as the Teen Area and the Rotary Room. The Grand Hall—a pleasant and functional space—but one that has gone largely untouched for 12 years, will probably require some minor modifications.

Approved by Library Board 12/15/2014