

READING ROOM*

Most cities have at least one LIBRARY, an accumulated collection of knowledge in one repository. The following pattern describes an essential part of any such building.



The reading room of a library is a special room, a comfortable place where citizens can go to casually read a book or conduct serious research, in a peaceful environment.

Libraries represent the accumulated knowledge and creativity of mankind. Within its venerable walls lie books, journals, and magazines on every topic imaginable. Without easy access to such knowledge, however, it would be worthless.

Most libraries have some sort of lending policy, under which patrons are permitted to borrow books for a given amount of time. One, then, might ask, where is the need for a reading room? The answer is, there are many situations in which a reading room would be desirable.

First, some books – particularly rare and old books – may not be borrowed, in the interest of preserving them. Second, suppose you are doing research, and only need certain small passages from very large volumes. It makes much more sense just to obtain what you need at the library, without the hassle of carrying out heavy volumes. Finally, there is a certain atmosphere unique to a library, an inspiring presence generated by the wealth of knowledge mankind has collected through the ages. Such an atmosphere can be quite conducive to study.

A good reading room in a library supports all of these experiences. A patron is free to spend as many hours as he wishes, whether he is merely browsing or seriously researching. In doing so, the reading room aids in the noble goal of sharing and advancing the state of human knowledge.

Although there is wide variability in the styles of reading rooms, they all seem to share certain traits:

1. High ceiling. For whatever reason, high-ceilinged rooms seem to induce an inspirational and contemplative atmosphere. Perhaps the magnifying acoustic side effects force people to forgo conversation and turn inward.
2. Comfortable chairs and tables, arranged away from the walls, but with generous space in between. Access to and from these primary study areas should be completely unrestricted, leaving space to pace and ponder, take a break, and the like.
3. Excellent lighting. If possible, large (floor-to-ceiling) windows, or even skylights are desirable. Natural light provides the best light to read by. When that is not possible, soft incandescent lights, angled upward, seem to be a viable alternative.
4. Comforting décor. A stark interior is not very inspirational at all. The best decors seem to include a polished, slightly worn but still majestic look. Carpeting and wood paneling in earthy tones are definite plusses.

If you still doubt the utility of such rooms, consider such rooms at Stanford University. One might argue that with an abundance of study areas – dorm rooms, dorm study rooms, and the like – would obviate the need for library reading rooms. However, the high patronage of these rooms seems to contradict this. The reason is that reading rooms afford something unique, some intangible. Although reading rooms certainly offer access to a great number of books, and a quiet space in which to study, their greatest gift is the mood they generate – an ageless feeling of connection to the combined knowledge of the human race.

Therefore:

Design libraries to contain at least one reading room. Make it large and spacious, yet comfortable, inviting, and contemplative. Access should be unrestricted. Build it so that it can receive the greatest amount of sunlight possible.



Build the room with HIGH CEILINGS. If possible, install FLOOR-TO-CEILING WINDOWS and SKYLIGHTS. Use a variety of DIFFERENT CHAIRS and DIFFERENT TABLES, arranged with generous amounts of space. CARPETING and WOOD PANELING are essential to the décor...