

YALSA Position Paper: Teen Spaces and Public Libraries

This paper provides an overview of and commentary on teen spaces in libraries and its implicit bearing on the strategic vision, planning, and development of facilities design for 21st century libraries. Attention is drawn to key success factors such as understanding why teen space is important, consideration of current and future priorities, best practices related to library facilities designed for and with teens, and the needs of the local community. This paper will help build understanding around the importance of teen space within a library's organization and its community, and address issues which shape the quality of a teen patron's experience with their library.

Background

Over the past two decades there has been a transformation in library facility design for and with teens. Traditionally speaking, common practice was often either to ignore dedicated space for teens or to develop a space that didn't take into account the developmental, academic, and personal needs of teens. Many libraries were designed without teen input and preferences in mind, driven by the personal likes and ideas of librarians, administrators, and architects.

As the teen population increases and as libraries look to reevaluate their priorities and services in the 21st century, more and more school and public libraries are working to accommodate teens, moving away from traditional approaches towards creating more efficient, innovative, appealing, and teen-inspired spaces. This reevaluation of priorities is necessitated by the fact that teen demographics and needs are changing, a development that is discussed in YALSA's 2014 report, "The Future of Library Services for and with Teens: a Call to Action." Additionally, according to the Public Agenda in June 2006, three-quarters of Americans believe it is a high priority for local public libraries to offer a safe place where teens can study and congregate.

Position

As libraries continue to move forward, organizations of all types, sizes, and budgets must realize that inviting, comfortable, and user-centered environments are integral in: 1) meeting the needs of all teens, 2) transforming the role and image of the library, and 3) contributing to successful community development. Libraries are essential informal learning spaces within communities that bridge the gap between the classroom and afterschool, and they provide an ideal environment for all teens to engage in connected learning activities—hands-on, teen-driven activities that enable teens to learn while exploring their passions and interests.

Whether building a new library, renovating an existing facility, or working on a minor facilities revamp, the primary key success factor is understanding why an informal learning environment that specifically recognizes teen needs and interests is critical. Developing dedicated, attractive, motivating, and teen-oriented space creates a positive, safe environment for learning, socializing, and leisure activities. It is a way to outwardly and interactively acknowledge teens and their needs by supporting adolescent development, creating an environment which encourages emotional, social, and intellectual growth, and building a sense of teen belonging, community involvement, and appreciation of how a library fits into their day-to-day lives.

Creating an inviting and supportive teen space helps connect teens to library resources beyond what their initial visit or need might have been focused on. Once teens experience a welcoming environment, they will want to branch out and connect with other library resources, such as materials, programs, staff, volunteer coaches and experts, and peers. This deeper engagement with the library will help teens expand their knowledge and interests as well as help them develop an appreciation for the library as an essential part of the community.

When creating a welcoming library teen space, staff must work with stakeholders and others working in youth development to learn about community needs and how the space can help to meet those needs. Libraries must consider the needs of all teens in the community, not just current library users. Working with the community in this way will help to guarantee that the library's teen space supports the community as a whole.

Other key success factors for teen spaces include making teen voice and engagement a priority as well as a regular practice throughout the planning, design, implementation, maintenance, and marketing of the space and related teen library services. It is also crucial that libraries appropriately size their teen facilities based on community/student population (ages 12 – 18), and not on existing teen use. Libraries must re-evaluate space allocations in their overall facilities and scale them according to demographics and overall community needs, not traditional practice or personal bias. In public libraries, the size of the space should reflect the needs of the community overall and the informal and formal learning activities that will be supported in that space, based on a vibrant community engagement process.

It is important to keep in mind that “teen-friendly” is not synonymous with unruly, unreasonable, impractical, and tacky. Don't make assumptions or let personal biases impact decision making, whether selecting furniture, shelving/display units, digital tools, flooring, lighting, paint color, signage, etc. Overall the space should encourage positive use of the library as a whole.

All space and facilities projects should include a well thought-out plan for improvement, including short-term and long-range planning for current and future teen space and services. Identify what teens *need*, not what adults *want*. As noted in YALSA's Teen Space Guidelines, teen friendly space should be flexible and allow for teens to move furniture so that they can be comfortable and successful in collaborative and independent activities. It should allow for small and large groups working together, and should enable ongoing upgrading to support the evolving way in which technology and digital tools are used by teens.

All library staff should have professional development opportunities in order to learn about the importance and value of teen space and how best to interact with teens in that space. This includes allowing for flexible use of the space and creating rules and procedures that do not impede or interrupt that use. All library staff should acknowledge the need for the entire library to be a safe and welcoming space for all patrons, including teens, and not view the dedicated teen space as the only part of the library where teens are welcome.

Conclusion

Making libraries appealing and important to teens is not an impossible task. Library facilities design, based on teen and community input, is one integral step in attracting teens and to ensuring that libraries remain relevant into the future. Looking at teen facilities design in a new light, letting go of antiquated ideas, re-evaluating traditional ways of doing business, and emphasizing patron needs and wants are essential first steps in moving forward in the world of 21st century libraries.

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