

Librarians, Architects, and the Space in Between

A conversation with Regan Young
about the essentials of collaboration

By Tina Keresztury



Not long ago, in a java joint not so far, far, away, librarian Tina Keresztury sat down with architect Regan Young to talk through the critical relationships that foster either inspiration or havoc during a building project. Keresztury, associate state librarian with the New Jersey State Library, recently managed a \$45 million grant program that funded additions, renovations, and new buildings for 68 public libraries statewide. Young is owner of RYEBREAD Architects, a Mount Holly, NJ, firm that designs public and K-12 libraries, as well as other public and private sector projects. An architect with 30 years experience, he also comments on architecture, planning, and related topics for newspapers, magazines, and radio.

Keresztury and Young discussed common disconnects between librarians and architects. For example, librarians sometimes perceive architects as “monument builders,” favoring form over function, while architects see librarians as only one voice on the project team of engineers, consultants, and administrators. While such misconceptions can hamper a good working relationship, more conversation also revealed a deep mutual respect between librarians and architects.

Young, who characterized both fields as “profoundly optimistic pursuits,” noted there are remarkable similarities in the stereotypical librarian/architect personalities: both can be somewhat introverted, with a laserlike focus, and extraordinarily well organized. Keresztury held that librarians and architects are both Renaissance types, visionary, interested in everything, and looking toward emerging and future trends. Together they agreed that many librarians and architects today are futurists; both study demographic, education, social, sociological, and technology trends and their potential impact on buildings and their use.

TINA KERESZTURY I think while it's interesting to talk about our similarities and differences, I'd rather focus on ways in which we can work together more effectively as professionals. You have broad knowledge about a lot of building types; my focus is libraries. I have visited many new and renovated library buildings in the state and around the country, so I get to see and hear about what works and what doesn't work in this particular building type. Lots of times, I hear my librarian colleagues say, “We know what we want and need in our library building, but our architect isn't listening to us.” What do you think is going on here?

REGAN YOUNG Architecture is by its nature a collaborative art, and construction is a contact sport. That being said, why does the architect sometimes appear to be not listening?

The first thing to realize is that the architect is surrounded by a project team that knows more than he (or she) does. The librarian knows more about providing library services; the structural engineer knows about sizing steel beams, the mechanical engineer is smarter about calculating friction losses in ducts, the landscape architect

can more easily rattle off indigenous species. The architect is in the middle, trying to coordinate all this expertise, hopefully knowing enough about each to engage in a meaningful, creative discourse.

Please be assured that the architect has also visited numerous library buildings but may have a different set of insights and criteria as to what the design is trying to achieve.

Personally, I've toured libraries not just regionally but nationally and around the world to analyze what works and what doesn't. And I've been there frequently with librarians, so I know that we each perceive things from our own perspectives.

TK How do you think our perspectives differ?

RY The architect must be an advocate not only for those who will work in the library but also for the users and for the entity that will own the building (probably the one that hired his/her firm). At the same time, the architect is trying to use his/her skills and talent to create something that shows off the best that our culture has to offer.

TK I'm surprised that you think it's the architect who is the advocate for the users. Librarians begin any renovation/construction process by thinking about our customers. That's why we hold focus groups and survey our customers: to find out what they need and want. We involve the public, our staff, and our board in planning library facilities. We often hire library-specific building consultants to prepare building programs before we even sit down with an architect. So our architect must listen to our insights in order to design a building that responds to our users' real needs. Sometimes, we feel our ideas and opinions are not taken seriously. We advocate for both the public and our staff and want to build a library that will be the pride of the community and be reflective of the community's needs.

RY In successful projects, the architect and client allot enough time and resources for “pre-design.” This consists of customer research, of course. But it also includes site and building analysis, examinations of precedents and paradigms (including field trips), process planning, review of applicable code requirement and environmental constraints, and the use of appropriate technology. All this needs to be absorbed before design begins.

TK I'd like to talk about library-specific building consultants for a minute. In general, how do architects feel about working with these consultants? Does a building program give you a good plan to follow or does it stifle or affect creativity or do something else to the process?

RY Librarians tend to feel more comfortable working with these consultants in the programming phase because they are often experienced librarians. They speak their language. If they can bring consensus to the needs assessment, it can help move the process along.

TK Librarians want architects to come up with solutions to the problems we have. I know I would like options from which to choose. For example, we want teens to use libraries but how do we deal with the noise they may bring? How do we make good decisions about “going green”?

RY Like life, architecture is a series of compromises. And



BUILDING A RAPPORT Architect Young and librarian Keresztury found themselves sharing more than coffee in a discussion of the library/architect marriage and how honest communication can benefit all concerned

each solution must respond to its own context (function, materials, codes, and budget). The happiest circumstance, however, is when one plus one equals three. Sometimes a number of issues can be addressed through a single creative solution.

Usually the most successful strategy is for the client to focus on the what (their needs and their customers' needs) and the architect to respond with the how (the physical response to these needs). "My Father's House Has Many Rooms," and so there are many possible responses to a set of needs. It takes a bit of work to get the right fit, but you'll know when it's correct. Afterwards, it seems so obvious.

TK That's a good summary of what I also believe. It would be helpful to know what you think librarians absolutely must have from architects.

RY As you suggested earlier, as in any good relationship, the architect needs to be able to really listen. At the same time, the design professional needs to be able to communicate effectively, graphically, and verbally.

Your architect must be able to respond to the orientation, views, access, and opportunities unique to each site. Thoughtful landscaping and site planning tie a structure to the land and make it belong, and sensitive lighting, graphics, mechanical systems, and interior design enhance a building's livability. New work must take shape acknowledging our built heritage, which includes the realities of the 20th century and the possibilities for the 21st century.

Even more, you need a design professional who is personally committed to accomplishing all this while at the same time minimizing the project's cost, delay, maintenance, and ecological impact and enhancing the quality of life in our built environment.

TK That's a tall order, but that is exactly what is needed. Before choosing an architect, we have to ask the right questions to make sure we hire the person who can do this magic for us.

I always advise librarians to speak to others who have recently completed construction projects with potential architects to find out how the process and product turned out. It's important that they do their homework and take field trips to see the architect's work. I urge our librarians to visit an architect's place of business to get a feel for their surroundings and a sense of their style. I also have a number of questions that I suggest they ask during the interview process. (See sidebar, "Tina's Checklist.")

Do you have any other questions you think librarians should ask when interviewing an architectural firm, or any other insights that will make this relationship work better?

RY Just like on any first date, beware the person who just talks about him/herself; they're not interested in you. I say

beware of the canned "dog and pony show" presentation that may have a lot of bells and whistles but has little to do with the services you'll receive. If I were a client, I'd want to ask about the architect's systems to control the project quality, costs, and schedule. I'd also ask for a sample set of design and construction documents.

TK So tell me, Regan, what do architects absolutely need from librarians when doing a project?

RY Frankly, librarians need to establish their place at the client's table before the architect is hired. Opinions are nice, but the librarian needs to participate based on organization, data, and (hopefully) knowledge that will add to the value of the project.

The selection committee needs to know its scope of work (program) and scope of services. Which project team members will be working for the architect and which will be working directly for the owner? There needs to be a clear hierarchy, process, and time line for the selection of professionals. (In a recent proposal, the director had no selection committee organized a month after the RFP was due; what a disaster!)

TK What would make my job and your job easier once we start working together?

RY I would say at the beginning of the process the entire

project team needs to spend some time coming up with a mutual definition for a successful project. What issues must be addressed? What are the parameters? Who are all the stakeholders? Everyone must commit to a procedure to manage the budget and schedule. It's no good to stumble upon these issues halfway or, worse, at the end of the project.

TK Yet, this happens frequently. There are problems during the project and numerous change orders that lead to upset; projects get behind schedule and over budget. I urge librarians to learn about the architect's background. For example, how many projects went over budget? What were the reasons? What is the history on change orders?

RY An architect who tells you in the interview that there will be no problems is a damned liar. Construction is a messy business. You have to build this thing out in the weather, dealing with issues of trades' skill (and motivation) levels, disruptions in the supply of materials, and regulatory uncertainties.

I envy the automotive designers; they get to spend millions building prototypes and then get to manufacture thousands of every design, exactly alike, in a perfect interior environment. In architecture, every one of our designs is a prototype.

It's hard work. But as Tom Hanks said in *A League of Their Own*, "If it was easy, anybody could do it. It's the hard that makes it great!" The architect must configure the process to anticipate, and deal with, these problems in an effective, timely manner.

TK How do you know when a project is going well?

RY Good projects can come only from a successful collaboration among members of the project team, contractors, clients, and government. Thus skill, inspiration, perseverance, compromise, communication, and revision are all essential parts of the design and construction/renovation process.

TK It sounds like a marriage! Getting everybody in the family to communicate and work out problems.

RY I once wrote an article about marketing architectural services called "The Mother of the Arts and the World's Oldest Profession." The premise was that professionals and their clients should aspire to an ongoing, mutually beneficial relationship rather than a quick throw in the cheap part of town.

TK What is the best advice that you can give a librarian doing a building project?

RY Read *How Buildings Learn* by Stewart Brand. (He's the guy [behind] *The Whole Earth Catalog*.) It's the most important book ever written for understanding the built environment. ■

Tina's Checklist

Is the architect flexible, which always makes for an easier working relationship?

Does the architect have the political skills necessary to listen and respond to the concerns of all the various stakeholders?

Does she or he have excellent facilitation and presentation skills to move the project along?

Will the firm have the time and resources to complete the project?

Who will be the key contact in the firm for the entire project? (It's frequently not the person who is interviewed.) How do they handle the construction administration phase?

Who will be on the project team? I have a whole long list of possible other project team members, which includes an ADA compliance officer and interior designer.

Where have they worked together before?

Exactly what kinds of services will we be receiving?

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