



## **Russell Library Vision Committee**

Findings and Recommendations

July 14, 2021

The Russell Library Vision Committee is pleased to present the following Findings and Recommendations, the end result of our committee work over the last several months.

### **BACKGROUND**

Beginning in March 2021, the Russell Library Vision Committee met monthly to discuss the mission and goals of the Russell Library, learn about current and anticipated best practices in public library design, and define a vision and priorities for future Russell Library facilities. This report will be presented to and discussed with HMA<sup>2</sup> Architects, the firm that is currently conducting the “Russell Library Facilities and Engineering Assessment and Space Planning Recommendations,” in order that they may have a more comprehensive picture of what the Middletown community desires for its public library infrastructure.

The Vision Committee is composed of nineteen community members, library staff, and Board members, representing a wide cross-section of Middletown’s population and stakeholders. Many Committee members previously served on the 2020 Russell Library Strategic Planning Advisory Council and Work Group and have thus been well-prepared to continue in-depth discussions about the future of the library.

### **COMMITTEE WORK**

The mission of the Russell Library is as follows: “*We empower people to grow, connect, strive and thrive.*” The first assignment for Vision Committee members was to translate our mission into the ideal facility or facilities for Middletown (it didn’t necessarily have to be a library). The Committee

described ideal locations, amenities, “look and feel,” and much more -- all with the end goal of empowering Middletown residents and visitors to *grow, connect, strive and thrive*.

The Committee was also asked to name some of their favorite places to visit and spend time, and to describe what made them so desirable. Many children with family or school connections to Committee members also participated in this exercise. This youth feedback was very important to the process, as the library’s Foundational Strategy implores us to “Practice equity and inclusion, and listen to youth voices.” Only by incorporating the input and vision of our young people can we ensure a viable future for the library.

After reviewing our responses to the first set of exercises, we compared those responses to national and international best practices in library design. It turns out there was quite a bit of overlap, particularly in the areas of flexibility, human-centered design, accessibility, and sustainability. Interestingly, several concepts were also echoed in the suggestions given by participants at the Middletown Plan of Conservation and Development community charrettes in 2019.

The Committee’s final exercise was to visit the Russell Library and consider whether and how our stated vision might be accomplished within the context of current library facilities. We also asked ourselves, “what might be some paths forward?”

### **VISION FOR THE RUSSELL LIBRARY**

The Committee determined that our vision items fit within five themes: Middletown’s library facilities should be

1. Human-Centered
2. Accessible
3. Fun, Dynamic and Flexible
4. Connected, Inspirational and Aspirational
5. Sustainable

Below are descriptions of each theme, with examples from Committee members.

## **1. Human-Centered**

A public library should be welcoming, comfortable, safe, healthy, and easy to use. It should smell good and look beautiful, with pleasing color schemes appropriate to each area's designated purpose. A wide variety of furniture and seating must be available to support different uses and needs throughout the building. Maximizing natural lighting/daylighting, and the use of plenty of glass, is essential. The library should feel like a "home away from home." Food and drink should be available and allowed in most areas.

Health is a top priority, particularly post-COVID, so proper ventilation and air flow are key, as are surfaces that are easy to clean and sanitize.

Connections to nature are essential, including options such as indoor-outdoor convertible spaces, rooftop and community gardens, green walls, plants and trees throughout the building and grounds, water features, nature sounds, views of the Connecticut River, and more. This concept is referred to as 'biophilia' and is a best practice in building design.

Safety is key. All areas of the library should be easily supervised, with no dark "nooks and crannies" out of the line of sight of staff. Spaces for small children should be configured so that youngsters can be supervised and contained by caregivers. Young people should have a safe place to "hang out" without being "shushed" continually. There should be areas with lower ceilings and a cozier feel, as well as wide-open areas; this concept, in which people can observe without necessarily *feeling* observed, is referred to as "prospect and refuge."

Using the library should be convenient. Drive-up windows, after-hours pickup lockers, and book drops are desirable. Curbside pickup is here to stay, and Committee members even brought up the possibility of delivery to patrons inside the library (for instance, while the patron is monitoring small children and therefore unable to browse on their own). There should be plenty of places to plug in a laptop and/or charge devices.

## **2. Accessible**

By Accessible, we mean that *everyone* can use the library, regardless of ability, language, gender expression, or any other lived experience. The library building should be 'legible,' meaning that it is easy, from the outside,

to see what is happening *inside* the library. Signage and wayfinding should be clear and intuitive without being intrusive or cluttered-looking.

The “flow” of the building, as well as adjacencies, are very important: Loud, busy areas should not be located right next to quiet contemplative spaces, for instance. Rather, there should be a progression from active to passive, public to staff, loud to quiet. All staff office areas should ideally be located near one another inside the library building.

Transportation to the library should be easy and affordable, as should parking. The possibility of bus stops from Beman Middle School and Middletown High School was brought up. The library should be “close to it all,” while still serving all 42 square miles of our city. All Middletown residents should live within a short distance of a library facility. Satellite branches, “pop-up libraries,” and even wifi-enabled bookmobiles are examples of how library services could be extended to all Middletown neighborhoods, not just downtown.

### **3. Fun, Dynamic and Flexible**

These three words describe the spirit of Middletown. In fact, Committee members said that the library should evoke a sense of place, and that is “uniquely Middletown.” The library should acknowledge our history and our unique spot in the Heart of Connecticut. We should capitalize on being the Forest City, and on our great location on the bend in the Connecticut River. A signature library that showcases Middletown’s history and spirit will be a big draw and a great economic booster. In short, the library should “embody the Middletown brand.” The public library should look and feel like “everything Middletown wants to be.”

It will be important to emphasize creativity and fun in public library spaces. There should be plenty of spaces for people of all ages to play; after all, humans learn through play. LEGO(™) walls, gaming, arts and craft areas, and indoor movement centers/playgrounds are some ideas that the Committee generated.

Because Middletown is a magical and often quirky place, the Committee feels that it would be ideal to incorporate some “surprise and delight” into the library: Perhaps a sailboat or train in which to sit and read, a secret

bookshelf, some twinkle lights, or even a slide from one level down to the next (as in the new Martin Luther King, Jr. Main Library in Washington, D.C.). There should be flexible spaces that are always changing and evolving, perhaps to showcase Middletown businesses or enterprises. Rather than being a static, transaction-based entity, the library should embrace experiential services that focus on people first.

Flexibility of spaces is absolutely essential. The COVID-19 pandemic brought this to light, as physical distancing and occupancy limits posed an enormous challenge, particularly in buildings such as the Russell Library, parts of which are nearly 200 years old and were designed to facilitate 19th-century worship services, not 21st-century community needs.

Movable/reconfigurable walls/NanaWalls and raised flooring (to allow easy changes to HVAC and electrical infrastructure, for instance) are examples of features that will be essential in future library facilities.

#### **4. Connected, Inspirational and Aspirational**

The library should connect people with inspiration, education, opportunity, and community. Access to the latest technologies should be widely available: Digital media labs, podcasting and video production, and maker/tinker/repair spaces are a few examples. Since the public library has always been, and should continue to be a civic engagement center, technology enabling post-pandemic style virtual and hybrid meetings is a must.

Creativity and artistic expression not only enhance the human experience, but they bring people together. Arts venues of various sizes within the library, from small to amphitheatre-sized, would no doubt be heavily-used, as would rehearsal spaces. Galleries should proudly display the creations of community members of all ages and backgrounds. Dynamic group art projects, or even something as simple as a chalkboard wall, could foster great connections and creativity.

Food is a major “connector of people;” breaking bread together not only satisfies physical hunger but builds empathy, understanding and trust. The Committee talked at length about the possibility of the library housing a teaching kitchen, gardens, and even a farmers market. Middletown is a

“foodie” community; as a community connector and booster, the library should embrace that fully.

## **5. Sustainable**

In September of 2020, the Middletown Common Council declared a climate emergency. All City department heads, including the Russell Library, have been directed by the Mayor to create plans to reduce or eliminate greenhouse gas emissions by 2030. The design and energy use of future library facilities must therefore involve bold steps to address energy usage: solar, wind, water and geothermal energy are all on the table, and Committee members mentioned “LEED Platinum” status as an ambitious goal if and when any new library facilities are constructed or if current facilities are renovated.

The library should serve as a “resiliency center” for Middletown. Since storms are predicted to increase in frequency and severity, the library should be equipped to continue operations and offer critical services to the community, even during widespread power outages.

Finally, the library should be sustainable with regard to staffing. Clear lines of sight between and within service areas would allow for fewer staff on public service floors at any given time, and eliminating “nooks and crannies” will provide improved safety through improved monitoring of all spaces.

## **POSSIBLE PATHS FORWARD**

After defining and discussing the above-mentioned five-part Vision, the Committee conducted its final assignment of visiting the Russell Library and considering whether and how the Vision might be accomplished within current library facilities, as well as what may be some paths forward. Many of the recommendations would require extensive renovations, including the following:

- *“Address and reconfigure all the unusable space/extremely high ceilings in the Main Reading Room and the upstairs Information area.”*
- *“Get rid of the columns in the Lobby; they inhibit wayfinding and legibility of the space.”*
- *“Remove most of the second floor. Create an outer rim for computers and build a water feature through the center of the building.”*

- *"Slice through the current entry into the courtyard space. Change ceiling and floor heights to create a higher ceiling on the ground floor and a lower ceiling on the second floor."*
- *"Reimagine uses for the courtyard space."*
- *"Build upward for views of the river and create a rooftop garden. Install solar panels near the rooftop garden, and make them accessible to the public as a STEM experience."*
- *"The current facility is not equipped for seamless technological updates. The brownstone portion of the building, the former bank section and the lobby addition require completely different systems for wiring. This leads to complicated and costly upgrades."*
- *"Our current space will never have the capacity to meet the future needs of our community. We need to strongly consider the future dimension of our facility."*

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Committee has completed its main charge of defining a vision for the future of Middletown's library facilities, as detailed above. That future must reflect and support Middletown's aspirations, personality and potential.

In addition to furthering the Vision Committee's five-point vision and the Russell Library's mission of *empowering people to grow, connect, strive and thrive*, library facilities should also reflect the vision laid out in the *City of Middletown 2020-2030 Plan of Conservation and Development*; that is, Middletown should be *Thriving, Vibrant, Connected, and Sustainable*. ***It cannot be overemphasized that any future library infrastructure must be reflective of all of these.***

Whether or not the Committee's and Middletown's vision can be accomplished readily within current library facilities is a question that has yet to be determined. It is, in part, the charge of our current Consultant, HMA<sup>2</sup> Architects, to help parse. After conducting a thorough Facilities and Engineering Assessment for all library properties and meeting with the Vision Committee this summer, HMA<sup>2</sup> will present some recommendations for future library spaces so that leaders and stakeholders can make decisions and begin planning for library services for the decades to come. The Russell Library Vision Committee stands ready to assist in any capacity required in order to ensure a viable and vibrant future for the Russell Library.

**Russell Library Vision Committee 2021:**

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