

74th IFLA General Conference and Council The Library Buildings and Equipment Section

Wow! Toronto Branch Libraries Transformed By Anne Bailey



As a leader in public library service, Toronto Public Library (TPL) promotes excellence in architecture and public spaces as central to community development and neighbourhood vitality. Library branches and services make an enormous contribution to the cultural landscape, social engagement and economic growth of the city. The local branch is everyone's living room. Good public space in library branches is integral to renewing, revitalizing and inspiring local communities and enriching the city's quality of life.

Following the amalgamation of seven library jurisdictions in 1998, Toronto Public Library became the busiest public library system in North America. With 99 branches from large to small, the majority between 30 and 80 years old, Toronto Public Library needed to upgrade, improve and enhance many branches. A branch renovation program was initiated to revitalize public library spaces in neighbourhoods across the city. Since amalgamation, Toronto Public Library has invested \$98 million CAN for branch repair, renovation, revitalization and expansion. 17 branches have undergone significant renovation and six branches are currently in process. Two new branches have been built and two others are in the planning stage.

This initiative is explored through several neighbourhood library renovation case studies. Policy and planning framework, community engagement process, building assessment, design and service delivery are examined. Best practices and innovations are highlighted. Pre and post renovation analyses are presented. The branches selected illustrate a variety of situations and aspects germane to successful neighbourhood library renovations. There are many challenges inherent in branch library renovations. It is often not possible to start again and build a new facility. What can be done when funds are scarce and rebuilding is not an option? How are uninspired, mundane buildings transformed? How are older, well loved heritage facilities updated to provide modern library services? Why should each branch renovation project be unique, requiring individual care and local solutions within the context of larger library policies and frameworks? What makes a wow in local branches and how does this change from place to place and space to space?

Planning and Policy Framework

The new Toronto Public Library developed a *Service Delivery Model* to guide branch planning and projects.¹ The model provides for a tiered branch structure with three different levels of service. The two largest libraries comprise the research and reference tier. Seventeen mid sized district libraries are spread across the city, providing access to extensive recreational and informational services. The remaining 79 libraries are neighbourhood branches with two additional new neighbourhood branches currently under development. Neighbourhood branches serve populations ranging from 20,000 to 50,000 people attracting users from a 1.6 km radius. They range in size from 10,000 to

15,000 square feet to provide adequate space for collections, computers, programs, study and community gathering. The minimum space requirement was upgraded in 2007 from 7,000 to 10,000 square feet for new construction as there is a demand for larger facilities. Only 16 of Toronto Public Library's neighbourhood branches meet the new standard. This is a challenge in meeting increasing expectations for library services and buildings.

Thorough and current building assessments are critical to maintaining good spaces and in justifying funding requirements for these well used public buildings. Toronto Public Library conducted a review of all branches after amalgamation to identify building deficiencies, priorities and work required to ensure that all branches are in a good state of repair. Twelve of Toronto's branches are over 80 years old and 48 are 30 to 80 years old. At the time of amalgamation, many of these branches had not been renovated for years.

Branch planning is also linked to the Library's strategic priorities. Currently, Toronto Public Library is creating a new strategic plan to guide services over the next four years.² Draft themes and goals were developed for public consultation following extensive research on demographic, social and environmental trends in Toronto and on library trends worldwide:

- engaging diverse communities – in the city and in its neighbourhoods
- addressing the growing income gap – towards a city of opportunity shared by all
- our lives in digital times – libraries in the virtual world
- supporting creativity and culture – participation and access at the city and neighbourhood level
- supporting a sustainable library

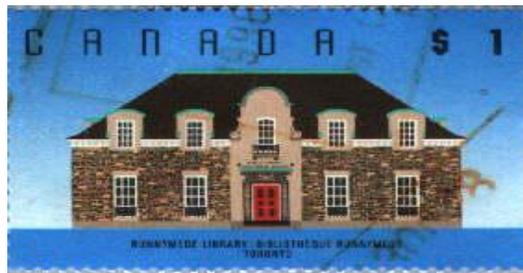
These themes build on the key priorities of the Library's 2004 – 2007 plan: books and culture, youth, newcomers, low income neighbourhoods.³ They inform branch revitalization and design decisions. For example, the focus on youth has led to the development of unique teen spaces in renovated branches and youth involvement in planning these spaces.

Toronto Public Library's *Public Consultation Policy* is another building block for branch renovation and revitalization.⁴ Public consultation is key in the development of every building project. The needs and interests of local communities are actively sought for each project through public meetings, open houses, focus groups with various stakeholder segments, written comments, community outreach and development. Reporting back to the community on what was heard and how it was incorporated in the plans follows. While time consuming, public consultation is critical to a project's success. It builds citizen engagement, support, knowledge and enthusiasm. At both Runnymede and Beaches Branches, citizens became enthused about the potential for improvements to the outdoor library spaces and then became involved in fundraising and volunteer initiatives to introduce exterior improvements not provided for in the project budget. Citizen engagement fosters innovation and creativity. It helps both staff and architects to focus on what is most important. The consultation becomes a moving circle of community inputs and project outputs, all of which need to be carefully communicated at each step of the process.

A project team that includes public service and facilities staff as well as the project architects is an important component of Library projects. In addition to local staff, it is important to have public service staff on the team who participate in all capital projects. This consistency ensures that we learn from our mistakes, know what worked well and can transfer these learnings from project to project. Detailed plans are developed by the team for each project including building and construction criteria and local branch service plans. All members of the team attend public consultation forums to listen, share expertise and learn.

Runnymede Branch

The first case study focuses on the Runnymede Branch. Public library service in the Runnymede area began in 1904 in a modest frame building. In 1928, Toronto City Council granted Toronto Public Library \$100,000 to provide new branch libraries for several districts, including Runnymede, and the present site was acquired. Noted Canadian architect John Lyle was appointed to design the new facility. Runnymede Branch was considered “a radical departure from the customary ‘institutional’ library building with the creation of ‘atmosphere’ and ‘appeal’ ”.⁵ Designed combining Georgian, French and early Quebec styles, the building has a high pitched roof with black slate tiles. Walls are constructed with local Credit Valley stone. Canadian themes and motifs including totems, local plants and animals and native reliefs adorn the entrances with an arrowhead design in the iron railing on the window above the main entrance. The new library was immediately popular and became well known and loved in the community. In 1975, Runnymede Branch was listed in Toronto’s *Inventory of Heritage Properties* and cited for its architectural context. Runnymede Branch was also selected from buildings across Canada as the first issue in Canada Post’s Canadian Architecture series of stamps issued May 5, 1989.



1989 stamp

The library serves a vibrant community, with residential areas spreading out around a busy shopping district where small stores line the streets. The neighbourhood retains an Eastern European flavour and is a favourite with professionals with young children. The library, located right in the shopping area, is a central hub in the community and has always been well used. However, over time, the branch became overcrowded and the cumulative effect of several interior renovations and additions made operations and services ineffective. The main floor was congested with poor sight lines. The 1979 addition at the rear of the library overlooked a park but the views were blocked by crowded shelves, clutter and leaking windows. Access was problematic as the addition was on another level and required several steps to access it. Due to budget pressures, the

addition had been constructed with grey concrete cinder blocks which also presented an unattractive view from the street and did not complement the original building.



The 1979 extension

The children's area was located on the second floor which was accessed by stairs or a lift. It too was overcrowded and lacked a program room. An area flanked with oak shelving, a fireplace and enclosed with glass doors, originally used for story times and puppet shows, had been closed off to create a staff work area.

In 2002, capital funding to renovate the library was secured. The project budget was \$3.119 million CAN. G. Bruce Stratton Architects were hired for this project. The branch closed for renovation in January 2004 and re-opened in June 2005.

To ensure that the design met community needs, an extensive public consultation process was undertaken. The architect and staff met with local residents to talk generally about how libraries can be renovated and updated and to engage users in discussions about what library service they wanted at their local branch. This strategy is more productive in eliciting what is important to people than leading a discussion that focuses on building deficiencies. It stems from the old adage that form follows function. Next steps included focus groups with adults, parents and seniors. Meetings were held with students at local schools, a boy scouts group, a local church and branch staff. In addition, written comments were solicited. Customers talked about the need for accessibility, better washrooms, quiet study and meeting space, improved air quality, better entrance and reception areas, display areas, improved collection access, zoned areas for children and teens, more computers, better windows with views in and out, enhanced outdoor spaces, and an addition that is sympathetic to the old building. All of these comments were considered in the design phase. In presenting the proposed design at the second public meeting and follow up open house, the various comments received were identified and the response in the plans was given. This made it evident to all concerned that library staff and architect had listened, heard and responded. As a result, public response to the design was very favourable.

A key decision in proceeding with this project was to demolish the 1979 addition and start over again. Although funding was tight, it was determined that retaining such a problematic structure would in the end be detrimental to the whole project and that a fresh start was required. The original Lyle building was 5,400 square feet and the 1979 addition added 2,500 square feet on a single story. One of the options considered was to add a two story addition. This presented problems in terms of the architectural integrity of the old building and opening up the space on the main floor. It led to a second key decision - all branch circulating and computing services should be on the main floor. A space that was open, flexible, efficient to staff and easy to monitor was created. More complex construction and approvals were required to make this happen since the larger new addition on the main floor had to be cantilevered over the nearby subway line.

The intent of the renovation was to create a modern library that is perceived as a whole but whose parts are easily distinguishable and identifiable, supplementing the integrity of the original building through contrast. The new addition is unconventional, playing off the original materiality of Credit Valley stone and copper, but deviating in form and formal arrangement. The new building opens up to the adjacent park, allowing for light, colour and visual texture to pass freely through the 16 foot north windows. A large curved punctured copper wall serves as an anchor for both the north end of the library and the south end of the park. Small punch windows add playfulness to the children's area inside, adding visual interest from the park, especially at night. A clerestory window runs along the spine of the addition and along the same central axis of the original building, providing considerable daylight to the stacks below and serving as a beacon after hours. Many of the building's original components have been reused – existing bookcases, entrances, and paths of travel have been restored and/or reinterpreted. The addition of an exterior walkway and an elevator has made the restored building fully accessible.

Photos: Stephen Evans



Runnymede Branch with new extension



Interior copper wall

Photo: Stephen Evans



The new extension showing the exterior copper wall



Main entrance

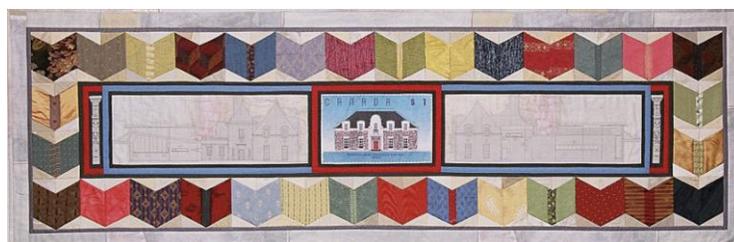
Imagine entering the renovated branch and seeing through the entire first floor to the park. Imagine the magic of light reflected through yellow glass windows and the colour of a bright green accent wall reflected on the copper wall. Wow. Or, as you exit the nearby subway station, feel drawn to the library by the side view of the extension as it sweeps out from the old building into the park.

Previously, as described above, branch services were on two floors, there was no meeting space, staff and public areas were cramped and the main floor had two levels. Following renovation, branch service functions are now all located on the main floor and a new multi-functional room is located on the second floor. The room is used for programming, community meetings and quiet study. As well a small exhibit and display area has been created on the second floor. A “Now & Then Quilt” made by a group of community volunteers to commemorate the library in the community, now hangs over the fireplace. Secondary public washrooms, a staff room and branch head office are also located on the second floor.

Photo: Stephen Evans



The second floor gallery with original fireplace – since adorned by a community designed quilt with the postage stamp as the centrepiece (below)



All branch renovation projects require something special, an extra touch that adds beauty and interest. As the Runnymede Branch project neared completion, it became apparent that the wall behind the service desk lacked interest. Yet it is one of the first and last things that patrons see when entering and leaving the branch. The staff thought that the area behind the desk would be used to store book trucks and that a shelf or two could be installed on the wall to store various items. Is this the impression that the library wants to leave with patrons? Instead, in consultation with the architect, a unique piece of art was sought and an artist whose work resonated with the architect for this building was found. In discussions with the artist at the site, it was agreed that a piece would be commissioned and created for this particular building and location. The result was an encaustic on canvas piece by artist Nicole Collins from her Lozenge Slide series with colours and size to complement the space. While art was not in the budget and it required an extra special effort to get it approved, it added a fine element of interest and flair to an area that would otherwise have become mundane and cluttered.

This was a challenging project. From a community perspective, the Friends of the nearby Swansea Memorial Branch were concerned about the long term viability of their branch in the context of a new improved Runnymede Branch. The Swansea Friends attend all Toronto Public Library Board meetings and of course attended all public consultation meetings for this project. Extra care was taken to include Swansea groups in the consultation. Many people in the area actually use both branches and the end product is something that both communities are satisfied with.

Renovating older branches like Runnymede can be very challenging and is often more costly than building new. Many contractors are cautious in bidding as there are sometimes unknown or unexpected conditions to address. In fact, a redesign and second tender were required to bring this project in line with the approved budget. The project was also challenging from the perspective of length of construction. The branch was closed for 16 months.

Nevertheless, with all of its challenges, it was worth it. Engaged and vested in the library, the community has responded well to the renovation. Use is up 40% at Runnymede. The branch bustles with activity. Users appreciate the views through the library to the park. They enjoy a library that functions well and enhances a treasured older building with an attractive, open, airy and spacious feel.

Beaches Branch

The original Beaches Branch was constructed in 1915, designed by Toronto architect Eden Smith and opened in 1916. It was one of three identical libraries in Toronto: Beaches, Wychwood and High Park. Eden Smith was best known for his residential designs, particularly for houses in Wychwood Park and Forest Hill Village, noted for their originality within the Arts and Crafts style. Eden Smith was one of the founders of the Arts and Letters Club in Toronto and one of Toronto's more famous early architects.

The Beaches Branch today serves an affluent community that values the historic homes that line the streets. It is located on the shores of Lake Ontario and features many lakeside parks. A small town within the city, the Beaches neighbourhood includes many families and there is currently a baby boom underway.

The original library was funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. It is one of seven Carnegie libraries still operating in Toronto including Beaches, High Park, Wychwood, Yorkville, Weston, Annette Street and Riverdale. Beaches Branch was notable due to the simplicity of the design, contrasted with the detailing of earlier library styles. The Tudor gothic interior was also innovative consisting of two large rooms modeled on the great hall. The main reading room featured an open timbered ceiling, stone fireplaces, leaded glass casement windows and a minstrel's gallery.



The original Carnegie building



The 1980 renovation

Like many older libraries, Beaches Branch was updated several times over the years and many service changes were introduced. In 1980, a small addition was added to the side and the entrance was moved. The building became crowded, run down and increasingly dysfunctional. It became essential to rethink the service plan and layout to revitalize this well loved and well used community cornerstone.

Funding for the project was obtained in 2003. The project budget was \$2.154 million CAN. The architects were Phillip H. Carter Architect in joint venture with Kingsland + Architects Inc. The branch closed for renovation in April 2004 and reopened in January 2005. The project involved extensive community input and a desire to maintain the integrity of the original structure.

The new design restores the building to its earlier 1915 style while allowing it to function as a modern library. The renovation features a new 2,000 square foot 2-storey addition, which replaces the 1980 addition, and a complete restoration of the original 1915 Arts and Crafts style incorporated into the brickwork, windows, circulation desk, lighting features, shelving and seating.

The replacement of the 1980 addition was key to our ability to revitalize this branch. Although there were budget pressures, it was a priority to ensure that the addition was demolished and the service orientation of the building was renewed. By doing this, it was possible to relocate the front entrance to Queen Street, with a descending staircase. A walkway from Kew Beach Park and the street sidewalk provide easy access.

During the public consultation, the community stressed the importance of the adjacent park to the library and wanted to ensure that the library had a strong connection with the park. The community raised funds for the installation of benches outside the branch, linking the library to the park. The exterior was further enhanced by the local garden club that purchased, planted and now maintains many bulbs, plants and flowers, creating a beautiful garden.

In addition to relocating the main entrance, demolishing the 1980 addition and starting again allowed for the provision of more effective and efficient service delivery. There were six levels in the branch, making it, to quote one architect, “library service for mountain goats”. The number of levels was reduced and service is now provided on two floors, with a mezzanine for quiet study.

The interior redesign also restores the original 1915 Arts and Crafts style including colors, flooring, circulation desk, lighting features, shelving, seating and the like.

The children’s and circulation areas and multipurpose room are on the main floor with large windows overlooking the park. There is window seating along the west wall of the children’s area and a storybook display house.

Photo: Brenda Liu/A-Frame



Children’s area overlooking the park

The adult, teen, lounge and study areas are on the second floor with large windows and views overlooking the park to the west and south and onto Queen Street to the north. An Audubon print of a shore bird from the Toronto Public Library collection was digitized, reproduced and framed and hangs above the fireplace lounge area on the second floor.

Photos: Brenda Liu/A-Frame



The second floor adult area with the interior restored to its original Arts and Crafts style



Mezzanine and teen area



Beaches Branch re-opened on a cold and snowy Saturday in January 2005 with a wonderful response from the community. Not to be deterred by the weather, people old and young walked through the snow to relish in their library. So many people came that staff appreciated the blizzard as there was no room to squeeze in more people. What if the weather had been fine? And what a wow for everyone to see the bright colours, new spaces and to snuggle down in a comfy, warm chair and gaze out over the frosted trees in the park through to Lake Ontario. Use is up and Beaches Branch is in our top 20 neighborhood branches, ranking fourteenth out of 79.

During the public consultation period, the idea of an architectural feature took shape. The representation of an owl, which connects with the park and also links to the idea of knowledge, evolved and a prototype was developed. Taking a leap of faith, the go ahead was given to architect Phillip Carter who worked with artisan Ludzer Vandermolen to create the feature, which is attached to a retaining wall at the front entrance.

In July 2005, a one-ton cast bronze owl with its nest of chicks, 3-1/2 feet high with a wingspan of 6 feet, was installed. It has been a huge success. A well attended exhibit at the branch on the making of the owl and an owl naming and writing contest celebrated the first anniversary of the re-opening of Beaches Branch. Named "Wordsworth", the owl has garnered enthusiastic community participation and positive media coverage for the library.

Photos: Brenda Liu/A-Frame



Main entrance at night



Ludzer Vandermolen's cast bronze owl

Jane/Dundas Branch

The last project for discussion is also the most recent. Jane/Dundas Branch renovation was completed in 2008 and it incorporates a number of design features that were not part of Runnymede or Beaches Branch projects. Best practices continue to evolve and the learning process is ongoing for capital projects. At Jane/Dundas, the design incorporates improved workflow efficiency for staff and better merchandising of library materials for the public.

The Jane/Dundas Branch serves a community in transition. A mix of residential and light industrial land surrounds the branch. Railroad tracks separate more affluent neighbourhoods to the south from working class neighbourhoods to the north. Gradually new housing and better shopping are revitalizing the entire community and the library is part of this process.

Jane/Dundas Branch had not been renovated since it was built in 1975. Located at a busy intersection but completely lacking in street presence, this dreary, run down building needed to be updated and revitalized. At 11,863 square feet, the facility was large enough. Building assessments indicated that while the structure was basically sound,

repairs were required including structural framing, replacement of roofing, flooring, electrical and mechanical systems, installation of an elevator, information technology upgrades and complete interior redesign and refurbishment. The building deficiencies needed to be addressed to bring the branch up to building and service standards.

From an operational and service perspective, Jane/Dundas Branch presented challenges. There were two entrances: one at the lower level leading into the children's area and one at the upper level from the parking lot at the west side of the building. There was also an interior ramp from the lower level that led up to the entrance on the upper floor. As a result, it was necessary to have a circulation desk on both floors to effectively supervise and monitor the facility and there was no connection between the two floors. The interior was dark and although the interior ramp was encased in glass along the front façade of the building, the glass sloped down towards the street and light did not reflect back into the building. There were no other windows in the public areas. The public meeting and program room was oddly shaped and was not easily supervised by staff so that it had to be locked when not in use. The public washrooms were not well situated for supervision and access. The circulation and staff areas on the main floor occupied a lot of space and were not attractive. The staff areas were not set up for efficient operations. The shelving was old and very high. There were few opportunities for collections merchandising and display.



1975 building



Pre-renovation main floor entrance and circulation area

Funding of \$3.45 million CAN was approved in 2006. The branch closed for renovations in September 2006 and re-opened in February 2008. The renovation was designed by Teeple Architects, Inc.

The public consultation for this branch followed the model used by Toronto Public Library with two public meetings held at the branch, followed by written comments and focus groups tailored to the make up of the local community. Located in a more suburban area than the other two branches discussed above, parking and vehicular access

was an important consideration that did not arise in the consultations for either Runnymede or Beaches Branches. Parking and access issues were further complicated by the fact that several nearby businesses and a daycare frequently use the Library's parking lots, often to the detriment of library customers. This issue continues to be problematic despite many discussions involving the local councillor.



2008 renovation with new glass facade

The Jane/Dundas branch has been transformed. Architect Stephen Teeple comments,

“The newly renovated library design becomes a community focal point bringing attention to the interior as well as the exterior, creating an overall brighter, safer and inviting streetscape. A new glass façade on the north face of the building, and additional windows on the east, bring soft, natural light into the library without excessive solar heat gain resulting in a bright and well tempered interior. Indirect southern light maintains the evenly distributed interior, producing the perfect reading environment. The main reading room features stacks which allow light to penetrate deep into the building. A new teen zone and children's area are done in lively bright colours, defining different interior spaces and accommodating the growing needs of younger customers. Comfortable and diverse seating areas, with a variety of lighting conditions, are introduced to accommodate both public and private needs. The introduction of elevators allows for wheelchair access, further accommodating the community and making the space a truly welcoming and comfortable environment for all.”⁶

Photos: Shai Gil Insite Photography



Interior ramp and window with views to teen area below and adult area above



Adult lounge



Main floor entrance and circulation area with Martin Bennett painting. See through glass floor to ceiling display cabinet on the left



Painting: Peter von Tiesenhausen, "Marker"

The interior of the branch has been completely redesigned with a focus on clear sight lines incorporating both flexible and zoned spaces. In addition to 19 computers featuring high speed internet access and word processing, wireless access is available. A fully equipped bookable program/ meeting room that can also be used for group projects or quiet study is available. There is also a popular small study/meeting space. Minimal signage is used in the interior as the branch has been planned for intuitive way finding.

With the new single entrance into the library with an interior stairway and elevator, it was possible to create one circulation area and refocus staff resources. Self-service check-out was introduced at Jane/Dundas using RFID technology. TPL started using this

technology in two pilot branches in 2004 and it is now being introduced in all Toronto Public Library renovation projects. At Jane/Dundas, the efficiencies from self service checkout translated into increased open hours when the branch reopened, moving it from a five to a six day service week. This is part of a larger TPL vision to increase open hours significantly at branches across the city using the benefits of self-service circulation.

Other new enhancements in TPL projects include a move to smaller service desks and to moving clerical work out of public service areas. Many Toronto branches have large circulation desks in the public area where most of the materials handling happens. New design models call for a different approach with returns from both inside the building and from external book drops going directly into the staff work room. Work rooms are located adjacent to service desks. At the service desk, there are combo check-out machines which are computers with two monitors, one facing staff while the other faces the public. This means that staff can easily monitor patron check-out activity and quickly resolve any problems that may arise by flipping from the patron monitor to a staff monitor and then back again. During the TPL self check-out pilots, the combo units were found to be a significant component of customer acceptance. In addition to combo units, TPL is also introducing stand alone stations, depending on the size of the location.

The Jane/Dundas Branch incorporates improvements in shelving, display and merchandising. With each branch renovation project, there is a tension between proponents of keeping everything and those of less is more. There is also tendency to put too much shelving on the floor plan and because the staff want to retain as many library materials as possible, the shelving height increases. Despite best efforts to ensure that collections are thoroughly weeded before each branch closes, they usually are not and there is a great flurry of weeding again before the branch re-opens. Jane/Dundas Branch was no exception. Once construction was substantially completed and the new shelving was installed, it was evident that a few ranges would have to go and that a height adjustment in one key area was required. The shelving was changed accordingly and this enhanced the look and feel of the space. The remaining old books in the collection looked unappealing in the new setting and there was not enough room for new material and so it became evident to local staff that more weeding was in order. The new shelving standards for TPL branches call for a maximum height of 67 inches with five shelves in adult areas and 48 inches in children's areas with four shelves for fiction and three shelves for non fiction and picture books. The bottom shelf starts at 7" from the floor and the bottom two shelves in adult areas are tilted to make it easier to read book titles.

The new Jane/Dundas Branch also maximizes opportunities for the display of library materials. Front facing shelves, zig zag inserts and slat wall end panels were added to many ranges to enhance display opportunities. Small items such as paperbacks, DVDs and videos were pushed to the front of the shelf by installing fillers. New display cubes and tables were added, all to promote the collections and enhance browsing and the user experience. Since the branch re-opened, staff have remarked on how much the material on display moves and how frequently the displays need replenishing. With better shelving and display, the collection is now more accessible and better used.

At Jane/Dundas Branch certainly the new glass façade creates a wow factor as the library is now remarkable and visible to the passer-by. From the interior, the glass façade creates a wow of a view through the facility. One final touch however, occurred as the branch was being restocked. Again, the need for art was identified. There was a barren red accent wall behind the service desk that called for something. Architect Stephen Teeple recommended a piece by Canadian artist Peter von Tiesenhausen, “Marker”, as suitable to enhance his vision of Jane/Dundas Branch in the community. Indeed it was suitable but also too large for the identified space. Another large space along the grand entrance was found and “Marker” now graces the wall. Another painting by Canadian artist Martin Bennett, “Static Image Painting / Grey / Swan / St. James Park” was found for the accent wall and hung on approval. What to do? No budget for art. The Toronto Public Library Foundation appreciated the added value of wonderful art in local spaces and provided the funding for the second piece for Jane/Dundas Branch. Staff report that customers comment on the art and what it adds to the space and their experience in visiting their local library.

On opening day, 1,555 eager residents visited the library clearly enjoying and relishing the new spaces and collections access. As with other branch projects, use is up and the word has spread to other neighbourhoods. Many library users are closely watching what is happening in the branch libraries. Every renovation raises the bar of expectations and brings requests from other areas to work the magic of beautiful public library space in their local branches.

Analysis and Learning

Experience with branch renovation projects has provided opportunities to learn, adapt and improve. Here are some of the things we have learned.

Public library branches are important public spaces. As such, every project needs to be driven by a vision for the branch and its service in response to the local community. Once you have that vision, it is important to demand the best and stay the course to make it a reality.

You need to respond to the unique features of each building and community to deliver a building program that will facilitate efficient service delivery and bring library service to life in innovative and meaningful ways.

Projects of this type take a lot of time and energy from inception to completion; once the budget is approved, it generally takes about three years to hire the architect, consult with the public, and develop the concept, tender and complete construction.

In public consultation, an open house with several display areas and staff to engage people in dialogue is often a better strategy for meaningful discussion than a public meeting. An open house offers more flexibility to people who want to attend. If it begins late in the afternoon, children and youth are more likely to participate. Open houses

generally get larger attendances. An open house approach also stops grandstanding or monopoly on the part of one or two individuals. Specific issues can be more effectively addressed in one on one conversation. Individuals that are reluctant to speak out in a public forum are more comfortable asking questions. The result is greater attendance, understanding and better feedback.

Local politicians and their staff need to be fully informed throughout the project. Their support can be helpful in obtaining funding, getting approvals, communicating with citizens and defusing problems. Sometimes this requires a special effort. For example, for Runnymede Branch, while the local Councillor did not oppose the project, he did not actively support it. So, I asked him to give me a few hours of his time and took him to see several recently completed projects. At the second branch, he commented that he now understood what the library was trying to achieve and from that point he wholeheartedly supported this and other library projects.

It is better to close for construction than to try to stay open. You save yourself a lot of extra work and headaches. Closing also gives you the opportunity to take a more holistic view of the branch and its services so that you can capitalize on opportunities provided by the project. It is safer for both staff and patrons. Staying open increases construction costs and the length of time to complete construction.

Alternate service is an important consideration for a successful closure. One of the most frequently asked questions in public consultations is, “What am I going to do while the library is closed?” Some of the strategies used include bookmobile service, extending open hours at a nearby branch, delivering programs and services with community partners and temporarily relocating key collections and programs. And once closed, providing community updates is important.

By the time the project gets approved and underway, money often becomes an issue. Aside from asking for more, you can build flexibility into your building program and tender with separate prices for some features, cash allowances and the like. It is also important to spend the money you have on items that achieve the best result. You also need to know when compromise is not an option.

Engaging front-line staff and the public throughout the project helps make the result something that everyone feels proud of and a part of its success.

And, sometimes you need to take a risk or try something new.

Some other important considerations to keep in mind include:

- Street presence (e.g. Beaches Branch)
- Make it as large as you can; when we started out, we thought that 7,000 square feet was a good size for a neighbourhood branch but now we realize that it is not large enough
- Service on one level is better than two or more

- Reduce the number of service points where ever possible
- Zone the space – include quiet areas
- Make the community room a space that can be integrated into larger public space of the branch when not in use for programs or meetings
- Plan the branch so that the areas make sense, sight lines are excellent and way finding becomes intuitive for the customer
- Review public traffic patterns and design the branch to make best use of these patterns
- Make the space beautiful, colourful, fun and delightful: make it a place where people want to be – again library branches are important public spaces
- Extend the library outside the building
- Add an element of art
- Daylight
- Lighting
- Shelving height: not too high and not too much
- Plan for bulletin board space, space for publicity material
- Collections: less is more; weed extensively, refresh and merchandise
- Integrate elements of retail and merchandising into the plan
- Service desks as small as possible
- Clerical work done in the staff work areas
- Returns directly into staff work areas
- Importance of quiet study space (can be in part of the meeting room)
- Introduce collaborative and interactive spaces
- Design good work space for staff
- Design to support changing services
- Finally, once the branch re-opens, keep it looking good. Reinforce with branch staff to avoid clutter, tape, endless signs and posters. Keep displays stocked and fresh. Get staff out on the floor with customers.

A green approach to renovation projects is an increasingly important consideration. Toronto Public Library projects are planned to improve energy efficiency, indoor air quality, water reduction and use materials and products produced locally and/or with recycled content. Going green costs money and future budgets for TPL renovation projects will need to incorporate more funding for these elements.

Branch renovation projects need to enhance the customer experience. As important community destinations, public library branch renovations in Toronto increasingly seek to present clean, beautiful, uncluttered public spaces where it is easy and pleasurable for customers to study, meet, attend programs, read, browse and use the collections. Branch libraries are popular, important civic spaces, the third place in the community after home and work.⁷ Today's public libraries are connected spaces, connected to the community and extending beyond the confines of the building. Branch spaces are wired for today's and tomorrow's technology. Branch libraries are transformed in renovation projects that wow the local community.

¹ Toronto Public Library. *Service Delivery Model*. Unpublished. Revised 2007.

² Toronto Public Library Board. *Strategic Plan 2008 – 2011 – Draft Themes and Next Steps*.
<http://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/pdfs/board/08mar25/10.pdf>

³ Toronto Public Library. *Urban Stories: The Next Chapter*
http://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/pdfs/strat_plan/abo_stp_urbanStories.pdf

⁴ Toronto Public Library. *Public Consultation Policy*.
http://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/pdfs/board/05jun06/14_1.pdf

⁵ Sanderson, Charles R. “Beauty with Utility”, *Construction*, September 1930, p. 286.

⁶ Teeple, Stephen, “Building and Renovation Description”, *Toronto Public Library Backgrounder – Jane/Dundas Branch (Ward 13) Renovation Project*, unpublished, 2008, p. 2.

⁷ Oldenburg, Ray, *The Great Good Place* New York: Marlowe and Company, 1999