

# Book Review

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*The Practical Handbook of Library Architecture: creating building spaces that work.* Second Edition. Fred Schlipf, Joe Huberty and John A Moorman. Published by Facet Publishing. £140.00



This book is huge; 761 pages in American ‘Letter’ format, comprising 36 chapters, divided into four sections. The title of Part One (‘Nearly Endless Observations on Good Library Design’) might seem deeply depressing, but is actually a thoroughly entertaining start to a work that presents a wealth of guidance and information in an engaging, if somewhat tongue-in-cheek, manner.

The authors of the previous edition, Fred Schlipf and John A Moorman, are both professional librarians. For the current volume, they are joined by architect Joe Huberty, but the book remains very firmly written from the librarian’s point of view. Its stated goal is to help readers “work effectively with the wide range of people engaged in balancing the technical, aesthetic, and functional aspects of any building project”.

Part One opens with 257 ‘snappy rules’ that set the tone: pithy, witty, and laced with a bracing dose of

cynicism, such as “The single most important construction material is money”, or “Sometimes the word *concept* should bring terror to your heart”. I was intrigued by the gnomic “Never seek architectural solutions to furniture problems”, but “Good shapes for all library rooms are simple rectangles”, will make perfect sense to anyone that has worked in a round reading room.

Parts Two, Three, and Four (entitled ‘From Overcrowding to Ribbon Cutting’, ‘Essential Spaces All Libraries Need’, and ‘Technical Issues’) continue in the same humorous but incisive vein, drawing on the authors’ personal experiences to offer clear advice on functional essentials of library building and design.

The book takes account of the wide range of buildings that house libraries and addresses problems inherent to old buildings. It contains a great deal of common sense, underlining assumptions that may seem obvious to librarians, but which should be specified to architects, to whom they may not be self-evident; for example, that a vital feature of study rooms is that they have “extremely good sound control”. The authors strongly emphasise communication (“Communication is the soul of architectural planning. Always speak up”), and insist that architects must allow enough time for clients to see and review their drawings. I like the attention to details such as provision for book return and staff lockers, and that there is an entire chapter on lighting.

This is a book that can guide you through the process of building a new library, from raising the money, hiring the architect and acquiring the site, through construction and installation of essential services, to security and insurance. For example, on p249 there is a particularly useful list of questions to ask a potential construction management firm, not least “How many libraries have you built?” and “How do you ensure timely close-out of projects?”. However, the authors allow for the fact that projects come in all shapes and sizes, and do not expect readers to tackle the entire volume; with this in mind, there is some repetition as certain important points appear in more than one chapter. There is a detailed index covering everything from accessibility to zigzag entrances, and the navigational aids are good overall, with clear headings throughout and excellent layout. There are few references to other publications and no bibliography.

Do I wish that I had read (parts of) this book before the Bodleian Law Library refurbishment? Yes, I do, because it would have given me the knowledge and confidence to question and more effectively challenge processes such as ‘value engineering’ (that is, cost saving)

when, at a late stage in the process, I joined the project management group.

The authors are American so there is, naturally, a North American bias: not many BIALL members need concern themselves with hurricane and tornado shelters, and it was a shock that the index entry for 'seismic issues' was not metaphorical, but literally about earthquakes. It goes without saying that some of the legal, regulatory, and planning information will not be relevant in the UK, but general principles, such as keeping to legal standards, should apply anywhere.

Writing this review, I became acutely conscious of how unwieldy a book this is, weighing-in at nearly 2 kg. It is not one to read on the daily commute, but it does lie flat on the desk when open, which makes it easy to use in the right situation. Authoritative, current, and clearly written, it brings its subject matter to life.

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