

Simone L. Yearwood

# Catching up with time

## Tips, tricks, and best practices for library renovations

**A**cademic libraries built before the wave of digital and broadband technology rolled in are now required to provide today's users with advanced technologies and facilities. As a result, libraries are renovating their existing facilities, as well as creating new spaces.

Benjamin S. Rosenthal Library (BRL), located on the campus of Queens College of the City University of New York, opened its doors during the spring semester of 1988. At the time, the award-winning, six-story library was "suited to high tech services for years to come." At its opening, the state-of-the-art facility was lauded for its "advanced technology" and "services of dial-up access . . . to library's databases."<sup>1</sup>

Nearly 25 years later, the technological advances in formats and access have left the library vastly outdated, unable to meet the current needs for more computer work stations, wireless access, and more comfortable study and lounge areas.

In 2008, BRL formed the Rosenthal Improvement Committee to initiate plans to

improve the library through a multiphase plan. As our experience may soon be your experience, an overview of the process, and lessons learned, may help you and your institution.

### The plan

We hired an architectural firm to design a master plan for renovation, which included identifying, prioritizing, and budgeting. An initial walk-through of the building led to the determination that the building was dated.



Queens College Rosenthal Library Reference Lounge.

After a series of meetings, renovation needs were established. Bidding was solicited from interested contractors through a Request for Proposal. The contractor that won the bid would commence reconstruction at the end of the fall 2011 semester. A Renovations Management and Implementa-

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tion Team was assembled, and I was assigned to the team to represent the library and its needs.

The contractor anticipated that the project would take an estimated 32 weeks to complete. With this projected time frame, the renovations would be completed in August 2012, just before the start of the fall semester. The library would continue to provide full services during the renovations; however, service areas targeted for renovation would have to be relocated.

After completion, the renovations resulted in several dynamic changes in the library. Level 2 was rewired for data networks, brighter lighting, and a new print and copy center was created that includes scanners and a card dispenser. Students now have access to new PC and MAC workstations. A new “smart” classroom has several workstations equipped with dual PC/MAC capabilities, Doc Cam, and a multifunctional media player.

The entrance to the library was revamped, with the installation of turnstiles to ensure better security for all patrons from the campus community. Distinctive signage in bold letters and the installation of floor mounted directories help users find their way on all six floors. The circulation desk became the borrowing services desk. The information area has been redesigned and relocated to better accommodate increased activity and quick, easy-to-answer questions. Library faculty provide reference service at a glass-enclosed research center.

A state-of-the-art seminar room with video conferencing and webcasting technologies was created along with the installation of three mediascape rooms. These glass enclosed rooms allow students to collaborate through the integration of furniture and technology. Library furniture was replaced with ergonomic designs, giving the library a much needed new look. The addition of lounge seating near an expanse of windows provides a place for students to relax while taking advantage of the natural lighting. In 2014, the library received the first-place

award for Excellence in Design from the Queens County Chamber of Commerce.

## Lessons learned

There were several lessons learned from the first two phases that may be helpful as your library considers and prepares for its renovation.

*1. Plan for the renovations.* An earlier plan for renovations was made with the help of an architect who designed a master plan. This plan had been created two years prior to the new renovation plan. As we planned for our renovations, we visited other sites so that we could get ideas for our own planning.

Tip: Before you submit your plans for bidding, reassess them to ensure that they are still current. Consider the time that may have passed when you initialized the planning phase and whether the plans are still relevant. Before consulting with an architect, form a committee and begin thinking of the changes that will be made. Think about how the renovated space will be used and how the changes will affect the way the library is used. Also consider how the newly renovated space will affect the overall context of your library and its mission.

*2. Notify campus affiliates.* As the library is a part of the larger campus community, we follow a systematic process for requesting work orders through the Buildings & Grounds (B&G) unit. At the start of the renovations, B&G was notified and graciously complied with the library’s need to bypass the work order system. Requests were processed quickly to prevent a delay in construction.

Tip: Once the plans have been approved, inform all necessary parties across campus of the work that is being conducted. There may be a need to have campus workers come in early or leave late, which would require planning.

*3. Be persistent.* During conversations with the architects and campus facilities project managers, it became clear that their perception of today’s library was that there

is no need to plan for books in print because everything is on the Internet. Their immediate concept of today's library was as a community center. The library stood steadfast on remaining a library and not becoming a community center removed of the physical book.

Tip: The most important thing to remember when planning your renovations is to insist that a practicing librarian serve on the planning and implementation team. Librarians are working in the field on a daily basis and therefore understand the needs of its users. The Internet is an extension of the library, and libraries still remain relevant in today's changing times.

*4. Scheduling renovations carefully.* Renovations began during the winter intersession. If

there was a need to disrupt services, it had to be planned carefully and thoughtfully to ensure that the disruptions in services were minimized. All activity that created noise disruptions had to finish before our 9 a.m. opening or take place during intersession when student activity was minimal. To accommodate this requirement, the contractors arrived at 6 a.m. Additionally, all activity that created noise or smells were prohibited during finals week.

Tip: When possible, schedule the renovations to begin at a period where there is the least amount of impact. In an academic setting, this is usually during the spring semester. Take advantage of the quiet summer months when scheduling the work. This will also allow a cushion of time for completion.

It may be necessary to request that certain construction work be ceased during exam periods (i.e., drilling, banging, or painting).

*5. Make alternate arrangements.* BRL is generally kept open for a 24-hour period during finals week. During renovations, the campus dining hall served as a substitute location for studying purposes.

Tip: When renovating a library while it remains open, there may be the need to relocate services or collections. Plan for alternate arrangements to ensure that services can continue with minimum disruptions. No-

tify consortia partners of your plans in case patrons need access to your collection when it may be unavailable.

*6. Create a renovations webpage.* During the renovations, clear and concise signage was placed in the



Queens College Rosenthal Library New Books Lounge.

affected areas notifying patrons of the new locations or alternatives that were available to them. We created a "Renovations News" section on the library's homepage to inform our community of the progress.

Tip: Inform the campus community and keep them updated of the progress regularly. After the plans have been finalized, inform patrons before construction begins, and update the webpage with weekly reports. Notify users of impending disruptions or nuisances in advance, and let them know how to access needed materials.

*7. Meet with renovation team regularly.* During our renovations, the Renovations Management and Implementation Team scheduled biweekly meetings. These one-to-two hour meetings were informative, and

allowed us to keep our community up-to-date on the progress of the work.

Tip: Once the work starts, meet regularly with the renovations team to determine the progress of the work and confirm that it is on schedule. This will allow you to make alternative arrangements as the need arises. Use these meetings as an opportunity to ask questions regarding the project. Never make assumptions about what is happening. Make sure to have a primary contact list. This allows the principle stakeholders to be readily contacted, avoiding delays in decision making.

8. *If you see something, say something.* During the renovations, we noticed that the Research Services office did not have a door. We assumed that it would be installed near the end, but the door was not included

in the master plan renderings. When it was eventually questioned, it was too late to install the door because the glass and wood finishings were already in place and it would be too costly to install at that point.

Tip: Do not make any assumptions regarding what is happening. To ensure that the project is being done to your satisfaction, make occasional inspections and address your concerns as soon as they are noticed.

9. *Use this time to implement other changes.* We used our renovations to implement changes to some policies and library services. As a library with six levels, we redesignated the library into two spaces: Levels 1 through 3 are designed for active, collaborative study areas, while Levels 4 through 6 have been zoned for quiet study.

Tip: As librarians, we hold steadfast to tradition. Most often, library policies are followed without question. Review legacy policies and determine if they are still relevant. Use this as an opportunity to foster the change in policies and procedures which should align with the library's mission and goals to serve the evolved/new/broader needs of the community.

10. *Reinvent your library space.* We redesigned our library space to create a library commons, a space that combines public services and access to the latest technology



Queens College Rosenthal Library Reference Summit View.

in software and equipment. This space is a place where students can talk, meet, study, and get research assistance. What was once a quiet area is now an active space that is often alive with the voices of

students working energetically, engaged in collaborative learning.

Tip: Take into consideration future technologies, and plan for the rapid speed at which technology is evolving. In today's environment, the role of libraries has drastically changed as libraries have been transformed into learning commons. Most libraries were built during the stage when the term *technology* was an unknown concept in popular and academic discourse. Libraries need to move away from simply storing collections and instead provide access to creative spaces that facilitate collaboration and engaged learning.

11. *Plan for problems.* While the BRL renovations began in late December 2011, the circulation staff was told that they would  
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Council on Education, and Association of American Colleges and Universities, to name but a few.

The 1997 ACRL National Conference invited academic librarians to reflect on the future in a variety of ways, as well, such as in roundtable sessions where speculation was encouraged.

One look forward came from the keynote by Cornel West in which he asked, "Will we survive?" and answered, "Yes. How depends on what we do."

In response to a vision of future need for library services, the Extended Academic Library Services Guidelines were updated, addressing the need for library collections and services to be universally available to the extended academic community.

ACRL advocated on behalf of academic librarians and higher education users as

both the Next Generation Internet Initiative and the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, along with other important information-related legislation, worked its way to U.S. Congress.

As the decade, the century, and the millennium all came to a close, the 1999 ACRL National Conference was held in Detroit with the theme of "Racing Toward Tomorrow." Copyright, scholarly communication, and student learning using the Internet were hot topics at the conference, which attracted 3,000 attendees. In stark contrast to the beginning of the decade, those who missed the conference could view the keynote on their personal computers via the web.

Fortunately, and contrary to some predictions, the world did not end, and the party continued past midnight on December 31, 1999. ♪

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have three months to relocate. Two weeks into the renovations, this was changed to one week. Instead of panicking, we quickly accessed our available space to meet the new deadline.

Tip: Be aware that "It Happens!" Be ready to address issues as they arise, and remain calm if or when they do. Unforeseen problems often disrupt the best laid plans. Construction generates noise, dust, and odors that can be disruptive to your environment. Minimize these by creating barriers between the construction and your library community. It may be necessary to relocate staff members who may not be able to work in close proximity to the renovated areas. Be ready to improvise quickly.

12. *Plan for future renovations.* After the completion of our renovations, we realized that we should have considered our egress on Level 2. We have placed that item on the top of our wish list for the next phase of planning.

Tip: You will discover that although your initial plan was well thought out, some things were overlooked. Use this to begin your planning for any future changes.

## Conclusion

The renovations have changed the library building from a place of quiet individual study into a dynamic collaborative learning and research unit that provides access to the latest technology. As another phase of renovations is planned, BRL will continue to update its facilities to further bring its building into the next evolution in the state-of-the-art for academic libraries. The lessons we learned during the first phases will help to guide us as we do.

## Note

1. "Cuomo leads fanfare at new, \$60 million academic library," *American Libraries*, 19, no. 9: 741. ♪