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OPEN



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Reopening Under COVID-19

A SPACE PLANNING APPROACH

Along with much of the US economy, most public libraries shut down in March. A Public Library Association (PLA) survey taken between March 24 and April 1 revealed that 98% of public library buildings in the US were closed to the public, with more than half expecting to remain shut for a month or more. Now, some of these libraries are in transition and many will be reopening within weeks. Given the health and safety risks, the task is daunting.

We will cover some of the considerations for reopening, but it is not an exhaustive list. Our approach is based on our background in merchandising, interior design, and space planning. We contacted the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and they guided us to their website. We recommend that all librarians read OSHA publication 3990-03 2020, *Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19* (www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3990.pdf), which we will discuss later. Despite advance notice and a list of specific questions, OSHA was unable to provide more specific guidance for reopening libraries during the pandemic. So please take this article for what it is: a step-by-step consideration of some of the key issues you should address when reopening a library space to the public, along with some thoughts from our specific areas of expertise in space design. Please reach out and contact us with any novel solutions or hard-won experience that you've accumulated along the way.



Loftwall Counter Shield. Photo courtesy of Duet Resource Group. Used with permission.

THE FIVE STAGES

While the vast majority of libraries remained closed in early May, it is certain that they'll reopen under a variety of circumstances. A small few may reopen in communities where the presence of COVID-19 is limited or undetected, and there is small evidence of community transmission of the virus. Many others will reopen in localities where the infection rate has declined dramatically from its peak, and the rate of transmission has slowed. And for other libraries, they will open as a result of policy decisions that may relate more to economic realities than health concerns. Particularly for libraries required to open by civic government rather than library leadership, the transition may be harrowing. To explore the consequences, we can define five potential stages of reopening:

1. **Staff Reopening**—While most library buildings are closed to the public, many had already reopened to staff by early May. In most cases, a staff reopening starts with supervisors only and does not extend to full staff until shortly before public services begin.
2. **Curbside Reopening**—While the interior remains closed to the public, some libraries may start to offer curbside delivery of library materials to patrons—similar to what restaurants and big box stores started doing shortly after stay-at-home orders emerged in many states.
3. **Walkthrough Reopening**—When libraries start to admit patrons, many will do so in a limited fashion. Proposed schemes include reservations and metering (similar to what many supermarkets have done during COVID-19). Some libraries may initially be walkthrough rather than sit-down.
4. **Sit-Down Reopening**—When gathering in larger groups is deemed acceptable, some libraries may be required to open to the public in a more substantial manner while others may elect to do so. It's unlikely that normal programs will return to most libraries in this time, but patrons will again read, study, and use computers in the library.
5. **Full Reopening**—For the vast majority of libraries, full reopening and a resumption of normal activities will only happen when a vaccine arrives or herd immunity to COVID-19 is achieved. Even then, we believe that some of the changes to library layouts necessitated during COVID-19 will persist.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR REOPENING

Whatever the scope of reopening, the priorities are largely the same. Public libraries serve their communities but must protect the physical and emotional well-being of their staff to do so. Four priorities should be balanced when considering how to open a public library:

1. **Safety**—The safety of both staff and the public is paramount. Some libraries may face the difficult situation of being required by governing authorities to open to the public before staff and management are convinced that it is safe. The best course in this case is to carefully craft the scope of the opening to minimize this risk and ensure the best health outcomes for both library staff and the public.
2. **Community Needs**—At the same time, the library must be acutely aware of community needs, which have shifted during the pandemic. Social isolation, mental stimulation, emotional engagement, and online connectedness are all areas that require much more focus in a COVID-

19 world. Libraries should carefully consider how to focus on the highest impact changes while maintaining safety for staff. In addition, certain vulnerable populations, notably including persons experiencing homelessness, may require a radical rethink in terms of how the library provides both services and access to information.

3. **Staff Morale**—One of the under-told stories of the pandemic is the extent to which it has created a mental health crisis among frontline workers. When libraries reopen, librarians will join this group. Staff morale will be an early indicator of potential mental health strains, and the services provided should be shaped to help bolster the staff's long-term ability to cope.
4. **Effective Design**—As libraries reopen, limitations on visitor flow, seating, pathways, and programming will necessitate a careful consideration of design effectiveness. As we will discuss, the pandemic may hasten the departure of wooden, four-person study tables which were already among the least efficient forms of seating for adults. Similarly, topics like pathway flow and territoriality, which have been explored by progressive libraries for years, will become an issue for every library to address.

OPENING ON THE OUTSIDE

For many libraries, an outdoor reopening precedes opening the building interior to patrons. The first service in this process is curbside delivery of hold items, usually to the trunk of patrons' cars. This is a simple means to begin circulating the library's collection again to some of the most engaged library patrons—those who use online resources to place items on hold.

We'll touch on some of the safety issues relating to both librarians and the collection circulation later in this article, but a phased reopening of the library starting with curbside service should also consider these issues:

1. **Adding a Concierge**—One of the key factors in safely opening a library will be to allow patrons

to access some normal library services while choosing their level of potential exposure to a still-circulating virus. For some high-risk groups like seniors or those with preexisting conditions, the trip to the library may be necessary or even helpful, but minimizing time spent inside the building will be vital. For this reason, a concierge located near the front of the library may be a good addition to libraries who do not have one already. During curbside delivery and outdoor opening, the concierge stand provides a needed point of service from which to stage items for delivery. In addition, though, the concierge can help manage any outdoor services and provide quick turnaround for vulnerable populations coming into the library with specific needs.

2. **Enhanced Outdoor Spaces**—As spring yields to summer during this first wave of the pandemic, public libraries that find themselves experiencing periods of temperate weather should consider whether outdoor seating can be a bridge to fuller indoor services. Libraries must be able to monitor these areas for social distancing compliance and be ready to shut them down if they don't meet community standards. But this is a relatively safer interim step to take as virus transmission is believed to be lower outdoors.
3. **The Digital Divide**—Another early question to consider when reopening is how to serve populations without online access or internet proficiency. Some libraries are already using bookmobiles to provide Wi-Fi hotspots in rural or low-income neighborhoods where broadband access is limited. With curbside pickup, libraries may want to consider starting a mobile hotspot lending program. For persons experiencing homelessness, though, this may not address the root problem. Creating an analog information kiosk outside the library to share schedules and locations for meals, showers, social services, and housing is vitally important while public libraries are closed. Bookmobiles could also be used to deliver food and supplies to populations in need without opening their interiors to the public.

THE GREAT INDOORS— WALKTHROUGH LIBRARIES

A whole new set of concerns will greet librarians when they open the front door to the public. We recognize that libraries may adopt a wide variety of practices and standards as they allow the public to reenter their buildings. Each practice will involve tradeoffs and should be based on the risk factors for the library as judged by local health professionals.

For many libraries, the next step towards a full reopening will be using the building as a walk-through space to allow the public to engage with the collection. While this precludes many of the functions that the library has traditionally fulfilled, it is the most straightforward means of providing access to the collection that cannot exist online. To take this step, librarians need to consider several important issues, starting with the question of access.

Access

The goal of a walkthrough library is to maintain social distancing, limit congregation, and provide equitable access to patrons with different COVID-19 infection risk profiles who should not intermingle while local transmission of the virus is still possible. Here are some of the questions to answer with access:

1. **Compliance**—Will your community comply with the access system the library puts in place? You can answer this question by looking outside on a nice day. If library patrons are not following social distancing guidelines in local parks, recreation areas, or beaches, librarians have valid reason to fear the same might occur in the library. If so, access plans with less room for transgression are advisable.
2. **At-Risk Groups**—Are there at-risk populations who access library resources? A good example would be a library that has a robust group of 70+ patrons but also a young-adult patron base. Creating separate hours for these groups to lessen the risk of cross-infection might be advisable.
3. **Community Spread**—Central to any decision about the appropriate level of access to the library

should be the overall risk of community spread of the virus. There may be localities where public libraries are either allowed or required to open to the public while community transmission is still robust. The greater the risk of community spread, the more stringent that safeguards at the library should be. The great strength of libraries in ordinary times is the breadth and diversity of the base of patrons they attract. This can become a hazard during a pandemic.

When these questions are answered, the library can formalize an access plan. Three options libraries may consider when controlling access are:

1. **Metering**—Limiting the number of patrons in the library at one time and establishing a socially distanced line delineated with stickers or markers to enforce social distancing outside of the building. This is the most straightforward way of controlling access to the library. This does require at least one library staff member outside the library in most cases to control admission.
2. **Reservations**—The library can also require reservations. This, however, necessitates some sort of check-in and may result in more compliance issues. This can be an effective solution if a high percentage of the library patronage is online and the remainder are willing to reserve spots by phone.
3. **Windows**—If there is a concern about less vulnerable groups (such as teens) posing infection risks to more vulnerable groups, then the library can consider providing windows of access limited to these vulnerable groups. The best time is in the morning, when the library has not been used since the overnight cleaning. Libraries should confirm that any scheme limiting library access at any point in time is legal in their jurisdiction.

Flow—the IKEA Pathway

In a walkthrough library, the best strategy to limit transmission risk is to limit face-to-face interactions. One of the first things to do with this strategy is to consider the pathways that patrons will use to



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engage with the collection. Creating one-way pathways similar to an IKEA store (or Stew Leonard's for those in the Northeast) will help limit these encounters. Some considerations for establishing pathways:

1. **Segmentation**—A walkthrough library will eliminate some common pathways, including those to the public computers, study carrels, and the storytime area. Libraries can divide the remaining use into manageable one-way loops—to the children's collection, fiction, nonfiction, and DVDs, for instance.
2. **Markers**—Instruction-based signage may seem like the most obvious way to enforce one-way pathways, but it is also the least intuitive, and will create compliance issues. Instead, create nonverbal cues that will help guide patrons to the appropriate pathways and improve compliance. A few things you can do:
 - a. *Floor Footprints*—Technically, this is gamification—adding a game element to a system we need patrons to comply with. Sizing

the footprints to adult or children can add feedback to reassure patrons they're on an appropriate pathway. Look for stickers that won't permanently mark your carpeting.

- b. *Facings*—You can indicate “wrong way” by facing displays away from the exit to a pathway. Patrons who see a display or shelf obviously faced away from them are less likely to move towards it.
 - c. *Highway Signs*—Road signs including wrong way and one-way signs are universally understood by adults and can add a fun element to pathways.
3. **Merchandising**—Merchandising becomes more important than ever in a walkthrough library. The goal of the library is to get every patron to interact with the collection, but to do so in the least amount of time possible in order to keep the flow of patrons moving smoothly through the library space. The best way to accomplish this is with curation and merchandising. Rather than leading patrons into dense stacks, create pathways surrounded by face-out displays (or at least face-out titles on shelves) that are engaging and easy to browse.
 4. **Barriers**—Consider adding movable barriers to the pathway at key points where patrons might tend to diverge from the path. These barriers might also be used in the longer term to protect seating areas. While fabric is believed to be a less favorable host to COVID-19, fabric partitions may not withstand nightly steam cleaning, so hard plastic or metal barriers may be more practical.
 5. **Self-Checkout**—Self-checkout stations can improve the efficacy of a one-way library flow and help socially distance library staff from patrons. Self-checkout screen surfaces should be regularly disinfected and librarians should consult health experts about other precautions to take, such as locating hand sanitizer near the stations. For maximum effect, self-checkout stations should ideally be placed in the exit path for the library and should be at least six feet away from another station or the circulation desk.

Libraries considering the move to self-checkout may take advantage of the period of closure to implement and test these systems before the public returns.

Minimizing Potential for Transmission of the Virus

Remembering again that we are not virologists, here are a couple of common-sense recommendations for libraries consistent with OSHA guidance in OSHA 3990-03 2020, *Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19*. OSHA has four categories for classifying workplaces according to worker exposure to SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19). Libraries in communities with no or little-known spread of the virus would be considered low-risk work environments. Libraries open in communities with significant levels of ongoing community transmission would be considered medium risk. On May 9, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released guidance for reopening workplaces. Included in the release:

- a useful decision tree for reopening workplaces (<https://bit.ly/3bK5A2f>);
 - a cleaning and disinfection decision tool (<https://bit.ly/3e2Miqq>);
 - a list of EPA-approved disinfectants (<https://bit.ly/2Zhl4IF>); and
 - overall guidance on reopening (<https://bit.ly/3bMasUL>).
1. **Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)**—For medium-risk workplaces, OSHA recommends that “workers with medium exposure risk may need to wear some combination of gloves, a gown, a face mask and/or a face shield or goggles. PPE ensembles for workers in the medium exposure risk category will vary by work task, the results of the employer’s hazard assessment, and the types of exposures workers have on the job.” PPE is not currently recommended for low-risk workplaces, though libraries may opt to adopt a higher standard of protection.
 2. **Masks for Patrons**—If it is legal in your locality,

consider requiring patrons to wear masks. Maintaining a supply of masks at the door to offer to patrons without one will help with compliance.

3. **Sneeze Guards**—Librarians interacting with patrons for checkout may legitimately feel endangered by airborne particles. In addition to providing PPE to these now-frontline workers, libraries should also invest in sneeze guards (clear plastic barriers between patrons and librarians) as an added measure of safety. These should be disinfected frequently.
4. **Cleaning**—Opening a library to patrons during the COVID-19 pandemic means committing to a nightly, professional cleaning routine, including disinfecting all surfaces that patrons or staff may make contact with. While there is no OSHA guidance on cleaning for workplaces during COVID-19, the Culinary Union recommends that hotel rooms have carpets steam cleaned at 160 degrees or higher upon guest checkout. This does suggest that libraries should also consider more frequent steam cleaning of carpeted and frequently touched fabric surfaces in addition to normal sanitation of hard surfaces.
5. **Collection Safety**—The American Library Association has developed guidelines on handling library materials and collections during the pandemic, including best practices for disinfection (www.ala.org/alcts/preservationweek/resources/pandemic). The safest route of all may simply be time. Quarantining returned items for four to seven days before processing, and having all staff handling collection items wear disposable gloves, will improve safety.
6. **Bathrooms**—Libraries may want to consider whether to open bathrooms while in walk-through mode. In addition to proper cleaning, libraries should ensure that there is hand sanitizer available inside and outside the restroom, and that paper towels are located near the exit along with a trashcan outside, so that patrons can avoid touching bathroom door handles after they have washed their hands.
7. **Testing and Tracing Employees**—Libraries should follow local guidelines with regards to

testing employees for COVID-19 and tracing the contacts of infected employees. Library directors can view themselves as aggressive advocates for librarian testing as some civic officials may underestimate the potential for transmission in a library setting.

- 8. Air Filtration**—Libraries should consider having HVAC systems inspected and maintained before reopening. Good airflow is important for enclosed spaces. Although there is no direct clinical evidence that shows that SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, can be eliminated by filtration, the National Air Filtration Association notes that “Properly installed higher efficiency filters can remove particles of relevant size depending on their installed capture efficiency, but current information does not allow for specific recommendations.” Read more about air filtration and COVID-19 at <https://bit.ly/2LKBkK6>.

REINTRODUCING A SITTING LIBRARY

When the walkthrough library becomes a sit-in library, but the pandemic has not yet ended, additional measures should be taken to protect patrons and staff. Here are the key additional considerations for this phase of reopening:

- 1. Socially Distanced Seating**—Innate human instinct—specifically territoriality—is consistent with virus prevention. In the US, most people feel uncomfortable sitting within six feet of someone they don’t know but who is part of the same community. (The distance is actually twelve feet for complete strangers in an outdoor environment.) Libraries have historically been much denser, but now need to heed these instinctive limits.
- 2. Barriers**—one way to improve the effectiveness of social distancing is to add barriers, especially in areas where close seating is difficult to eliminate, like computer labs.
- 3. Four-Person Wooden Tables**—This may be an auspicious time to say goodbye to your four-seat wooden tables. Keep the big, six-seat tables—they are useful and offer separation—but acknowledge that the same territoriality instincts we just dis-



Gee chair in pinwheel configuration with extended screens. Photo courtesy of Agati Furniture. Used with permission.



Manifest Desking System in pod format with side screens. Photo courtesy of Agati Furniture. Used with permission.

cussed meant these were not a space effective form of seating for adults before the pandemic and are completely ineffective now. Many libraries have been adding single person enclosed or semi-enclosed spaces to support focused or reflective work. The separation that supported that type of work also reduces the chances of exposure. As with computers, make cleaning supplies readily available in these spaces. Of course, there are tradeoffs. The more confined the space, the more concentration of the virus there can be. The more open or naturally ventilated, the less. A fully

enclosed space may provide separation but not the desired degree of ventilation.

4. **Play Areas**—Eliminate or isolate play areas for young children. It will be impossible to clean these frequently enough to avoid potential contamination between patrons. Toddlers in particular get everywhere, put their hands into and onto everything and then into their mouths.
5. **Group Size**—Consider the appropriate group size for the library and communicate this to patrons. Librarians can't be expected to distinguish between a family of six children and a parent bringing three neighborhood children to the library with her own offspring. Larger groups have more inherent risk in the library.
6. **Computers**—Computer screens, keyboards, and mice may require sanitation between patrons. In addition to any measures the library takes, make cleaning supplies readily available to patrons at the point of need. Barriers between computers should also be added where proper separation cannot be maintained.
7. **Programs**—It might be wise for libraries to resume programming only when most restrictions are removed at the community level. Enforcing social distancing is difficult in a program atmosphere.

GET SOME WORK DONE

A viable alternative for some libraries may be to use this in-between time, when libraries are open but not completely safe, to complete needed improvements, upgrades, or renovations. In a weaker labor market, project costs are already declining. Logis-

tics that seemed unmanageable in ordinary times may be significantly simpler during the pandemic. Any money you spend that employs local workers in a pandemic will benefit the local economy. This can also allow the library to take a pause and see the impact of loosening safety restrictions on the community as a whole before returning to business as normal.

MANAGING THE TRANSITION

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced society to adapt at a rate most of us have not seen in our lifetime. When everything in our life is in flux, it is only natural to cling to vestiges of the life we remember. Libraries are part of that world. As libraries transition to these new modes of operation, we all have to realize that seeing beloved institutions in a new light may be difficult for some patrons. Taking the time to listen and hear these voices—from a safe distance—may be the best advice of all. [PL](#)

READ MORE

OSHA publication 3990-03 2020, *Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19*, www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3990.pdf

National Air Filtration Association (NAFA), "Air Filtration and COVID-19," <https://bit.ly/2LKbkK6>

National Retail Federation, "Operation Open Doors," <https://nrf.com/resources/operation-open-doors>