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Why Outdoor Spaces Are Essential for the 21st-Century Library

Libraries serve as critical community partners by evaluating current and future needs and proactively filling gaps in the community fabric. Often libraries forget to use a key asset in their toolkit: the outdoors. Library buildings have historically included outdoor spaces, often to underscore the building's significance and to contribute to the beauty of place. Libraries of all scales and in all climates can use their outdoor spaces to fulfill their missions and effectively serve their communities. By turning the library inside-out, libraries can increase their available real estate for providing services and add a host of benefits for patrons.

Encouraging Healthy Lifestyles

Encouraging healthy lifestyles starts inside the library and continues to the outdoors. Sit-to-stand worktables are prevalent in staff workrooms and will also soon be common in public areas. For lengthy library visits, these types of workstations can help get the blood flowing and prevent back and neck issues. Libraries can also promote the use of stairs instead of elevators by making stairs easy to find, more convenient to use and even fun. Unique features such as literary quotes on stair risers and

treads that play music when stepped on can motivate users of all ages groups to use the stairs.

Having a relationship with the outdoors from inside the building can also have myriad health benefits. Studies have shown that a visual connection to the outdoors increases focus and productivity and provides a sense of well-being. Spaces with access to natural light can have rejuvenating benefits for library users and staff.

Southwest Regional Library (KY) features curving paths and an infiltration basin bridge that offers visitors opportunities to learn about the environment as they approach the building.

The xeriscape-designed garden outside the Sahara West Library and Fine Arts Museum (NV) invites visitors to enjoy strolling the site prior to entering the building.

Providing safe, attractive exterior spaces for staff and visitors extends the focus on wellness. Urban locations can encourage walking by establishing themselves as nodes on urban walking tours, featuring outdoor programs and displaying didactic panels that highlight the benefits of being active. They can also promote bike use by offering secure, covered bike parking.

Locations with more green space can host community gardens, supporting the consumption of nutritious, non-processed food. Well-lit walking paths and convenient connections to surrounding parks and pathways are popular amenities for many libraries. Weather and climate need not be barriers to using these outdoor paths. The sharing economy has increased borrowing of all sorts of things. Why not offer snowshoe

or ski rentals at the library to show a commitment to health and wellness?

Teaching Care for the Earth

Human health is inextricably linked to our care of the planet. As a highly visible community entity, the library can teach community members of all ages about the art and science of composting, water conservation, and ecological best practices. The Ramsey County Roseville Library's (MN) children's garden teaches water conservation by featuring an above-ground cistern that collects rainwater from the building's roof. A spigot on the cistern gives children access to the water, which they can collect in library-provided buckets to water the plants. When a rain event causes spillover, the water travels in a series of visible streams with displays that offer teaching moments about the water cycle. Views of exterior sustainable features from inside the building also serve as effective teaching tools.

The strategic placement of the Roseville Library's rainwater collection system within view of the children's lounge area allows the library to showcase water conservation even in inclement weather.

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