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Photos courtesy of David R. Miller, Architectural Photography and Design

albert wisner public library

The Albert Wisner Public Library, located in Warwick, New York is a 20,000-square-foot, energy-efficient, meticulously-designed building. According to the library's mission statement, it is "the community's connection to reading, life-long learning and personal enrichment." Nestled in a growing suburban town outside of Manhattan, the library's vision is to be the primary destination for information resources that will enrich the lives of residents in the Warwick community.



> DILEMMA

The farming town of Warwick experienced a significant population surge between the 1970s and 1990s. The construction of new roads, schools and homes became an essential part of the town's development. At the same time, the original 5,000-square-foot library building was no longer able to adequately serve the growing community. Lack of seating space, workstations and room for child and adult programs was becoming an increasing challenge for the staff and patrons.

"We were in an old, historic building that was not handicapped accessible and had no room or opportunity for modern amenities," remembered Rosemary Cooper, library director for the Albert Wisner Public Library. "We began working on the plans as early as 2002, but it was not until a successful referendum in 2007 that we eagerly began planning the design and layout."

The goal was to build a comfortable, lively and technology-enabled library that could be used for social, formal and informal gathering. Not only would the new space be busy with activity throughout each day, it would also be used as a centerpiece for the district, to host local events, meetings and other activities both during and outside business hours.

According to Paul Mays, principal of Butler Rowland Mays Architects, LLP, the firm selected for the project, "The library needed to reflect the farming heritage of the Warwick community by incorporating large, open spaces and lots of natural lighting. We were already thinking about how the furniture would be used to serve the patrons and complement the library design."

To succeed, the library furniture selected for the new space had to look modern, warm and inviting. At the same time, it had to be functional, with the ability to be easily reconfigured and moved as dictated by the events taking place in the library. It also needed to support the technology used inside the space and the people using this technology for both individual and group activities.

"We were extremely specific about all the design aspects of the library, especially with regard to the furniture," said Cooper. "We were able to get basic ideas from catalogs but wanted to customize a lot of our furniture to exactly fit the parameters of our new space."



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> ANSWER

When it came time to select the furniture, Bretford Manufacturing, Inc. was at the top of the list.

“While we were waiting for the approval to move forward on the new building, we actually did a small renovation project in our existing library using Bretford tables and custom shelving,” said Cooper. “Not only did we have great success with the flexibility of the shelving and durability of the tables, the Bretford group was quick and reliable. It just made sense to continue working with Bretford.”

According to Jennifer Dunn, library designer/project manager for Bretford, “There is definitely more competition to make a library different, especially as the facility plays an increasing role in creating an image for a town or school.” She added, “Not a lot of manufacturers have the capability or interest in designing customized library furniture products but with our onsite production and library design team this is an area where Bretford excels.”

The Wisner team selected Bretford’s Legacy brand library furniture including mobile, periodical, media and keyboard shelving, which is all customized to incorporate special 3mm hardwood edging and an open top. The shelving also includes special end panel displays and end-of-shelving workstations for easy reference.

“We don’t have a lot of walls because we wanted the area to have a very open, authentic feel,” said Cooper. “The Bretford shelving is truly the backbone of the library design. It works to break up the space while allowing the patrons to easily find what they need.”

“We used vertical wood panels on the shelving to add texture and depth and alternated low and high stacks to improve visibility,” said Mays. “The tops on the low shelving are typically used to set down materials while browsing or to lay open a book for perusal. Some of the shelving even includes end panels with computer terminals for easy reference.”

The team modified Bretford’s workstations and library reading tables by adding low, opaque privacy screens and curved computer tables. They opted for lightweight, interesting designs that still allow for privacy and give visitors the ability to use and charge their technology without a heavy, closed-in feeling.

“The Bretford study carrels are off the main library path in a ‘bump out’ area that is space-efficient but surrounded by natural light,” explained Mays. “At the same time, the curved Bretford computer tables are dynamic and easy to work around. The acrylic dividers that were added help orient the computer terminals in different directions to create a feeling of privacy.”

Because of their already reconfigurable nature, 12 of Bretford's standard RHOMBII™ training tables are housed in the main meeting room. The RHOMBII tables can easily be moved, changed and stored, depending on the type of meeting that is taking place. Their flexibility also makes them ideal for other special activities throughout the library.

➤ RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Although it took several years and countless changes to the design and budget, the new Wisner Public Library officially opened on November 15, 2009 with a ceremony, tour and celebration attended by more than 1,500 people in the community.

The new two-story space includes a program area, a flexible multi-purpose room, quiet study and reading areas and even a Warwick room to store and showcase the area's rich historical heritage. It offers full access for people with disabilities and sustainable, cost-efficient design features, including geothermal heating.

"Our new library is bustling with activity - we had 1,200 new cards added in the first two months after the library opened and we are still adding a dozen or more new library cards per day," said Cooper. "Our circulation also increased by 40 percent, with about 16,000-20,000 patrons coming through per month."

According to Cooper, Bretford's furniture in cherry stain and cabernet paint fully complements the natural lighting throughout the space. "At first we thought it might be overpowering but it ended up giving us exactly the punch we wanted. It's very substantial and looks so rich and modern," she said.

At the same time, the flexibility of the shelving allows the librarians to quickly change around the end displays with a simple pin system that doesn't require a screwdriver or other tools. And the mobile shelving and tables can easily be moved and reconfigured to accommodate everything from a fund raising event to an art display.

"We were able to make our library look exactly like how we envisioned it should look thanks to the custom Bretford furniture," said Cooper. "With a project this large, of course there were items that need to be fixed and changed, and that's where Bretford really stands head and shoulders above the competition. The company's customer service is outstanding. We knew if there was something that needed attention, the Bretford group would take care of it right away."

Bretford's Dunn added, "By being involved from the outset of a custom project like this one, Bretford can typically reduce installation costs. So we are able to provide our customers like Wisner with a unique set of furniture while helping them save time and money."



11000 SEYMOUR AVENUE
FRANKLIN PARK, ILLINOIS 60131 USA
TOLL FREE PHONE 800-521-9614
PHONE 847-678-2545
TOLL FREE FAX 800-343-1779
FAX 847-678-0852
WWW.BRETTFORD.COM

2 ETONGATE
110 WINDSOR ROAD, SLOUGH
BERKSHIRE SL12JA ENGLAND
PHONE 011 44 17 5353 9955
FAX 011 44 17 53539478

