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Looking Back: Margie Helm Discusses Library Building Trends in 1946
By Jonathan Jeffrey

In 1944 Margie Helm, Western Kentucky University's director of library services, gave a presentation about planning for new library buildings to a meeting of the Kentucky Education Association's Library Section held in Lexington.¹ Two years later she massaged that information into an article for the *Bulletin of the Kentucky Library Association* titled "Suggestions for Building or Remodeling a Library." (Helm, "Suggestions") Some of her remarks are quaint and others are as cogent today as they were nearly seventy years ago. I am going to provide the text of the article below without comment. At the end of the article I want to briefly elaborate on Helm's list of "special equipment" with comments from her 1944 presentation.

"There is a need for new library buildings in Kentucky. There is such a need all over the country after a period of building inactivity. New library buildings and remodeling of old ones will be undertaken just as soon as the necessary housing is taken care of. So we librarians must be reading now about building materials, floor plans, improved lighting, floor coverings, et cetra. We should also visit other libraries and find out what is being done in other places. I am writing here a few suggestions for our study, because we know that a successful building is achieved only when the librarian and the architect plan together."

"1. Library consultant. Mr. Joseph L. Wheeler in his survey of the Dayton, Ohio Public Library said, 'neither beauty nor efficiency cost any more than

mediocre design or mediocre layout; they are the fruit of study, care, skill and genius.' We should insist that our architects confer with an authority on library architecture. We librarians should refer to our Library Extension Division and to the American Library Association Committee on Library Architecture. We want an attractive building or quarters but we want even more a convenient one that can be administered economically. An architect may make serious mistakes unless he seeks information from a librarian who can advise and from a special library architect."

"2. Layout of the building. Planning for the future is efficient and economical. Perhaps only a unit at a time can be built. Walls should therefore be removable for later remodeling. Unless the whole building is planned first, one wing erected today may be entirely wrong."

"3. Lighting. The rooms should of course be light and airy. The windows should be large and reach nearly to the ceiling to get the best light and to allow book shelves below. Walls of glass blocks give additional light. War-time research in artificial lighting has made great improvements. Where we use it, 15-candle foot power is recommended. Fluorescent lighting, especially in a recessed fixture with proper glass to avoid glare, seems to be the most highly recommended. The fixtures are expensive but the wattage will be low to counteract the initial cost. Table lights are not entirely satisfactory."

"4. Floor coverings. New developments in floor coverings give us more durability, comfort, and quiet. Rubber tile is perhaps most expensive but holds

up best in rooms with heavy use and it's resilient. Other recommended types which have their advantages and disadvantages are cork tile, linotile, battleship linoleum, and asphalt tile."

"5. Air conditioning. In postwar plans, I believe we should consider a cooling system a requirement. A humidifying system is being used in many library buildings. Dry air is destructive to paper. If the air conditioning systems do not seem perfected enough to justify the expense yet, we should at least work out a cooling system of fans for the benefit of the patrons and staff."

"6. Sound insulation. Our newest buildings have sound insulation. A library should of all buildings have such equipment. It is the modern way of being seen and not heard."

"7. Special equipment. The postwar days are bringing us many news forms of equipment. Special rooms will have to be provided for the audio-visual equipment. Microfilm volumes will call for reading machines. Removable walls will make our plans flexible for future development. From the returning G.I.s we get several suggestions about making reading rooms more attractive. They suggest that we copy the better lights and the arrangements which many of their camp libraries employed. Upholstered furniture, a fireplace, color in the decoration, better lights, and a smoking room, they especially recommend."

"How shall we finance these new buildings with all their fixtures and equipment? The chief source will always be from the library income of course but there may be ways of supplementing it. There is some chance of federal

help from the building and remodeling program of the National Resources Planning Board.”

“Another source of financial help is through gifts, and especially memorial buildings and rooms. Many local communities are planning war memorials to their men and women who served in the armed forces. No better form of memorial could be erected than a library building. Furthermore families may become interested in equipping a room in memory to a lost son or daughter. This is a means of securing funds which we librarians should not overlook.”

“In conclusion, I want to urge that we librarians study the plans of some articles which are especially helpful.”

“Let us strive to shift traditional ideas and make our libraries more attractive and more functional to the patrons in the postwar period.”

That ends Helm’s 1946 article, but in her 1944 speech she made some interesting comments about the “special equipment” listed above as well as additional potential equipment. Relating to microfilm equipment, she predicted: “If we have not provided for microphotography, we soon will have to...shelves are overflowing with newspaper files. A reckoning day is coming. We must get the reading machines and change to films. The large volume of newspapers is overwhelming us.” She also recorded the need for a Photostat machine for copying purposes in most libraries as well as moving picture machines which she deemed “essential equipment.” She noted that the later would require an auditorium that could be darkened for showing movies as well as a storage

space for films. Other less significant purchases suggested by Helm included “portable cameras” which would necessitate dark rooms for film development and “talking books and the machines for playing them.” (Helm, “Plans”)

NOTES

Margie Mae Helm (1894-1991), a native of Bowling Green, Kentucky, received her library training from the Pratt Institute and the University of Chicago. She began her library career at Western Kentucky University in 1920, becoming head librarian in 1923. She was heavily involved in professional activities. She was one of the founders of the Bowling Green Public Library (now Warren County Public Library), served as president of the Kentucky Library Association in 1929, and was a member of the State Board for the Certification

of Librarians from 1938 to 1955. In 1927 she worked with architect Brinton B. Davis on the design of WKU's new library building. She also served as head of WKU's Department of Library Science when it began in 1929. She contributed scholarly articles to *Library Quarterly*, *Library Journal*, and *Kentucky School Journal*, as well as *Kentucky Libraries*. WKU's library building was named the Margie Helm Library in 1965. Always proud of her profession, Helm once said: "I believe in reading as a form of education and of elimination of racial and other prejudices. Knowledge of other peoples and other ways of life will contribute to a better understanding between peoples. I am proud to be a librarian." Helm retired from WKU in 1965.

WORKS CITED

Helm, Margie. "Plans (for) Library Buildings." Speech found in UA 51/1/3, University Archives, Western Kentucky University.

Helm, Margie. "Suggestions for Building or Remodeling a Library." *Bulletin of the Kentucky Library Association* 2 (1946): 7.

Photo Captions

Photo 1

Miss Helm is pictured here with two students in the “fireproof” stacks of the WKU’s library

Photo 2

In planning for new libraries Helm recommended “light and airy” rooms with large windows.