

Library Showcase: Darien (Conn.) Library – Interview with Alan Gray

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Date Completed: March 1, 2011

LOCATION ADDRESS

Darien Library
1441 Post Road
Darien, Connecticut 06820-5419

PROJECT INTRODUCTION

The Darien Library is ranked in the top 10 of public libraries in the U.S. and is one of the busiest in Connecticut. The library has a collection of 155,000 books and 24/7 access to several electronic resources.

Darien Library features centrally located RFID terminals that allow patrons to check out their own books—there is no circulation desk. Books returned to the self-return kiosks are sorted by an automated material handling system.

I asked Alan Gray, director of the Darien Library, some questions about the new library which opened in 2009.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-4739-8.ch012

Please describe the renovation/redesign project that was featured in the American Libraries 2010 Library Showcase.

This was the construction of a new library building – 57,000 square feet – opened on January 10, 2009, replacing a fifty-year-old 22,000 square foot building.

Why was the project needed?

A Long Range Plan undertaken in 1999 and 2000 made it clear that the range of new services, programs and spaces desired by the community could not be met by continuation in, or expansion of, the old library building.

Was new construction involved as well as renovation?

This was completely new construction.

Did user/patron needs fit into the planning/design process?

The Long Range Plan was based in large part on a series of public forums, focus groups and intensive discussion with active users. In addition, staff, administration and the library board spent considerable time imagining the future that our patrons would experience, and translated that into our thinking about the library that would serve patrons coming to us from that direction.

Why was the decision made to not have a circulation desk at the Darien library? Did patron opinion influence this decision?

We recognized that 80% of the interactions between staff members and patrons involved the pushing of books across the circulation desk. We wanted to construct a building, and a Web of technology and special relationships, that would allow a higher percentage of staff time to be devoted to knowledge work. That meant, in the case of our circulation staff, converting to a Reader Advisory model, with self-check stations picking up the bulk of circulation.

I should note that we have a Welcome Desk, at which one staff member, at least, is stationed, and there is opportunity for patrons to go to the desk to check out a book if they desire, and the Welcome Desk is used by Reader Advisors as the anchor point for their coverage of “Main Street” the place where our new books and DVDs are shelved, the “bookshop” where they talk to patrons to recommend books to read.

So it was not so much the influence of patron opinion, as it was our planning to serve unexpressed patron needs.

What has been the patron reaction to the absence of a circulation desk?

Very positive. From our opening day, about 85% of circulation has taken place at the self-checks, and the effect of the advent of Reader Advisors has been to increase circulation of books by 5 percentage points as a proportion of total circulation, from 52 to 57%.

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