

The Flooding and Reconstruction of Cedar Rapids Library:
Rebuilding the Iowa library from 2008 until 2013

Nicholas Westbrook

9/15/13

650: Fall 2013

Southern Connecticut State University

Description:

The flood of Cedar Rapids in 2008 left the town in disarray. One of the most emotionally painful blows to the public community was the damage done to the Cedar Rapids Public Library. The flood, which covered more than 10 square miles of the Iowa city, reached heights of over 30 feet and damaged 5 other major city services in its wake. The flood not only damaged city property, but also countless private housing areas, putting thousands of residents out of their homes (“Flood of 2008”, 2013). The library took a significant amount of damage, losing over 200,000 pieces of their collection in the flood’s wake.

Management/Procedures:

When news of the flood first reached the city, it was a desperate attempt to try and save as much of the material as possible. A feverish effort was made to move the library’s materials and computers to higher ground where they would be safer from the floodwaters. Though the town acted quickly, the library still sustained a severe amount of damage (sacrificed for the safety of the town’s hospital and other major facilities). In the aftermath, the library was able to reopen in another branch of main library, located in the local Westdale Mall; it was smaller by comparison, but it was an already established area for the library to rebuild. What remained of the library collection was quickly moved over to the secondary branch and plans for the next library renovation were quickly underway (Kaercher, 2008).

Methods and Techniques

In an attempt to restore normalcy after the flood, the library kept regular hours at their Westdale Branch. The library did their best to keep as many of the materials

available to the public. The library was a special relief to the children of the area, as the children's collection had been spared from the damage of the waters and summer reading programs were kept in full swing. The library still encouraged patrons to come to their mall branch where they were trying to maintain as much normality as possible (Geary, 2008).

Over the five years that followed, the library managed to gain enough funding and support from the city to rebuild a new library. The community, in an upswing of generosity, donated seven million dollars to their home library to privately fund the construction of the new library (Mussman, 2013). The town acknowledged the library as a source of information and the very heart of their community and scrambled to rebuild it. In the wake of a disaster, the city had come together to restore one of their strongest institutions and, as a community, they made it stronger than ever by replacing both the building they had grown to love and the collection that had guided them so well. The new 95,000 square foot building (with a collection of almost 250,000 new items to replace the ones lost in the waters) was unveiled on August 24th 2013 (Mussman, 2013).

The new library has a completely new collection, a large children's play area, an outdoor patio and a complete auditorium for the purposes of library programs. In the aftermath of the disaster, the library was given a chance to expand and re-evaluate their collection. They were able to introduce new technology and services that the library might have hesitated with before.

Other Related Issues:

Many issues came up concern the health and safety of patrons during the actual flooding. For example, another public building that had been hit during the storm was a

local hospital. The decision came to whether it was more important to preserve knowledge or preserve people's lives. The choice was made that the hospital should be preserved and library was lost (Kaercher, 2008). This had less to do with a decision made by the library itself, but the city had to decide (quickly) between an institution that would preserve their culture or the institution that would preserve their lives.

There was also a question of what to do with the books that had been damaged during the flooding. The library had instructed not to return materials that had been damaged during the flood, materials left unaccounted for during the disaster. The library also sustained its own losses to its collection.

After the flood, another costly concern appeared. After an examination from FEMA during the recovery phase, the library was declared 58.1% damaged (Malicki, 2009). This did mean that the library was eligible for federal funding for repairs, however recent events had determined that the library was in an unsafe position, should flooding occur again in the future. The building had been termed no longer usable, making the recovery effort even more difficult as a completely new library would have to be constructed in order to compensate for the destruction that the flood had created.

Personal Comments:

The disaster in the small Iowa community showed many examples where, sometimes, materials cannot always be saved. The library was destroyed for the sake of other public works (i.e. the hospital) for the safety and well being of the citizens. Some of the collection was about to be saved, however, a majority of the procedure was reliant on completion of the new library. The management, however, had the presence of mind to try and restore some sense of normality to the victims of the flood. Was their Westdale

Mall branch as significant as their previous branch? Probably not, but the story of the flooding does remind us that in times of disaster, something as simple as having somewhere to bring your children to play during the day can go along way in the desperate attempts at rebuilding a destroyed institution.

The loss of the library showed just how crucial the building was to the people of the small town. It was felt beyond just the people who worked in the library, but also by anyone who simply wanted a place to go. All of the library's normal functions were suspended for five years during the reconstruction process. Students were left without a place to study, community groups had lost a meetinghouse and so many of the resources people took for granted were lost for such a long time. When the prospect of a new library was announced, patrons generously donated to the library to rebuild it to its former glory.

I do, however, think that the best thing the library did was keep the library running immediately after the event. The library was kept running (even at minimal efficiency) and gave people somewhere to go. It reminded them just how important the library had been to them before the flood and how much they relied on it during the aftermath. Hospitals are easy to justify reconstruction of, as well as public work centers, but the library reminded people that it was an important part of their community and needed to be respect. The library was such a central piece of the community, that it was easy for people to explain why they loved it. The motion to erect a new building was a costly notion, but even before seeing the estimates and plans of the new building, people in the city quickly took the opportunity to do their part to rebuild the library. They did this because the library was such an important part of their upbringing in their town that

they couldn't think of a time when the library wasn't a crucial part of their upbringing.

To the city, losing a library became as unthinkable as losing the hospital when they were discussing the conditions for rebuilding afterwards.

Bibliography:

- “Flood of 2008 Facts & Statistics”. (2013). Retrieved September 19th 2013, from <http://www.cedar-rapids.org/government/departments/public-works/engineering/Flood%20Protection%20Information/Pages/2008FloodFacts.aspx>
- Geary, Mark. “Cedar Rapids Library Hit Hard by Flooding”. (2008). Retrieved September 19th 2013 from <http://www.kcrg.com/news/local/20612019.html>
- Kaercher, Dan. “Iowa Flood Stories 2008: Cedar Rapids”. (December 12, 2008). Retrieved September 20th 2013, from <http://www.iptv.org/iowajournal/story.cfm/396/feature>
- Malicki, Beth. “CR Library to be Rebuilt; Questions is Where”. (March 20th, 2009). Retrieved September 22nd 2013. Retrieved from <http://www.kcrg.com/news/local/41611022.html>
- Mussman, Amber. “What I’m Most Excited About”. (August 24th 2013). Retrieved September 23rd 2013 from <http://publiclibrariesonline.org/2013/08/what-im-most-excited-about/>