ATG Interviews Steve McKinzie

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one level, we deliberately made the building seem actually much bigger than it is.

**ATG:** Okay, you’ve given us a sense of what you’ve achieved, and we’ve seen that for ourselves. That is all fine and good to be sure, but let’s talk about the project’s peculiarities and risks, if I may use that word. For instance, it is well known that you refused to hire a nationally recognized library architectural firm. I am thinking of Shefly Bullfinch or perhaps Perry Dean and Rogers. Instead you employed a local architect who didn’t have a lot of experience designing libraries. We are wondering, Why on earth did you do that? You also dispensed with a professional interior designer altogether. One was never hired, I understand. And there is more, can I say? You went with an outside project manager, one whom the college had hired to manage not only this project but at least two others building constructions on campus at the same time. Weren’t all of these decisions enormously risky, and highly unconventional?

**SM:** Well, there is no question there was risk, and I suppose our approach was unconventional. Our circumstances dictated some of this. Our budget was limited, we were pressed for time, and the stakes were high. The librarians, the campus faculty building committee, and the construction team all had to work together to create a highly functional and extremely attractive building — all within a very limited budget. The entire building renovation project in its entirety cost less than three and half million. Not only that, but we had to abate asbestos and put on a new roof.

**ATG:** But what about the architect and the project manager? You didn’t mention them.

**SM:** Well, the project manager was a Godsend. He listened, allowed us to make a lot of our own decisions about the building, and went to bat for us in negotiations with subcontractors — things we couldn’t do on our own, and if I may venture a speculation, things that a nationally-ranked architectural firm may not have been able to do for us as well. As for the architect, she was similarly gifted. She had superb ideas but worked with us closely to design a building that met our needs and not her architectural vision. Most importantly, she wasn’t out to impress other architects or enhance her reputation in some sort of way. Her attitude and her sense of design were huge benefits to us in the long run.

**ATG:** But what about the question of interior design. Did you do all of that on your own?

**SM:** Sometimes a team of talented librarians and staff can do more than a professional designer. At least, that was our experience. We had some librarians here at Catawba — people like Keith Engwall, Jackie Sims, Constance Grant, and Amanda Nash, as well as some wonderfully-capable staff — who had a great sense of color and design — (some things about which I am relatively clueless, by the way.) These folks worked as a team, and they produced some great results. Call it luck, if you like. Call it the providence of God, but we did have an especially good team effort throughout the project, and I think the results speak for themselves.

**ATG:** Okay, I am with you. So maybe you did have the right combination of folks at the right time. I have no quarrel with that per se or with what your combination produced. The library is beautiful, but let’s move on a bit. What do you say about some of your more unconventional decisions? Didn’t you toss a lot of your old shelving, for instance? Wasn’t that an expensive waste of equipment? I also heard that you left a large part of your compact shelving collection in the building during the asbestos abatement. Surely you lost some of the collection with that kind of arrangement. Let me also add that the actual space for the collection seems — well can I say it — rather small. Did you really fail to plan for enough growth space?

**SM:** As to your question about shelving, yes, we did recycle and give away a good bit of shelving. But we actually saved money doing that. You see, we were using the shelving to house our books in temporary mobile units. It turned out to be less expensive for us to buy new shelving and move the books to that shelving, than it would have been for us to remove and move the books as well as move and rework the shelving. It was a cost-cutting decision. As for the asbestos abatement, our asbestos contractor wrapped the compact shelving so securely that we had no water damage and no collection loss. We were able to keep the compact shelving and the books shelved in that shelving here in the building throughout the construction process. In the end, we saved an enormous amount by not having to move the compact shelving itself — what would have been an extremely costly undertaking, to say the least.

**ATG:** But I also asked you about space, Steve. I did notice that much of the shelving seems rather full. Frankly some of the shelving appears to be near ninety per cent capacity or more. In all honesty, it looks as if you didn’t plan enough room for growth.

**SM:** Well, the short answer is that we didn’t. The college, of course, is committed to expanding the building within the next five years to make room for our burgeoning monographic collection, but that is a commitment contingent upon funding — not something that you can count on in these turbulent times. No, we don’t have enough room for growth. In the final analysis, we only had so much money and we had to make sacrifices. Our building committee of faculty and librarians was rather up front about that. We concentrated on creating a warm and inviting space with plenty of technology and as many study and group meeting spaces as we could manage. In designing the building, we decided that for us students and student needs trumped the hard copy collection every time. It was that simple.

**ATG:** Ah, yes, but that decision means that for a good while or perhaps from now on at the Corriher-Linn-Black Library, space for the collection itself will be an ongoing problem. Is that a decision that you would make again?

**SM:** Yes, the decision did mean that collection space will be a problem. And of course, it is a decision we would make again. As I said, for us students and their needs come first.