

A Forum on Library Construction

The Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary Library: Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana

by Eileen K. Saner

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary was founded in Elkhart, Indiana, in 1958 as the two largest Mennonite denominations in North America began collaborating to prepare leaders for the church. On farmland just south of Elkhart, a modest single-story building was constructed for classrooms, offices, and a library.

By 1975, the library had outgrown the original reading room and stacks, and a 6,000-square-foot basement was added for shelving and seating. The basement was connected to the original library by a lower-level hallway. Grass was planted over the basement in anticipation that above-ground library space would soon be added. The basement had no windows, and water flowed down the walls during heavy rainstorms, soaking the carpet. Poor lighting and cramped study spaces discouraged full use of the collection, which had grown to more than 100,000



Exterior of the library



Reference area

volumes by the late 1980s. Judicious weeding reduced the immediate pressure for a new library, but it was clear by the early 1990s that the collection was at risk and library users were not well served.

After being named the new director in 1986, I took every opportunity to learn about library building design and to evaluate the features of the libraries I visited. I wrote the first library building program in 1993, estimating twenty years of growth in the collection and predicting the future needs of users. Primitive laptop computers were just becoming available, and we were preparing to automate the card catalog. After conversations with two architects, a design emerged for a simple rectangular addition on top of the existing basement. In 1995, the library project was shelved during a period of leadership transition and financial challenges at AMBS.

Planning resumed in 2001 with a new president and the awareness that the seminary's spacious campus afforded the opportunity to plan an entirely new library, rather than simply tacking yet another addition onto the already inadequate space. The new library building program envisioned a hybrid library, maximizing the use of electronic and print resources in a climate-controlled, comfortable, and convenient physical environment. Growth in print collections for twenty years was anticipated with the understanding that online resources

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Reading Room

would eventually slow the increase in physical materials. To promote library services, staff work areas would be visible and accessible to users.

As library director, I chaired a new library building committee composed of the assistant librarian, a senior professor, the business manager, the vice president for advancement, and a student. From working sessions with two architects, a schematic design emerged that was presented to donors in 2003. Planning for the building paused during this period of fundraising.

In late 2003, I first heard about green building design through a local project at the nearby Goshen College environmental study center. I also began to notice articles about green libraries and other academic buildings being designed according to The Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED®) Green Building Rating System of the U.S. Green Building Council. Convinced that constructing a green building would demonstrate the seminary's commitment to care for creation, I urged the AMBS administration to resume the planning process with the added goal of environmental sustainability.

With the adoption of this new priority, work began in earnest as the seminary hired the professionals who would make our dream a reality. In addition to its original members, the expanded library building committee included the seminary's project manager, the AMBS director of maintenance, architects, engineers, and the leadership team of the previously selected general contractor. In August 2004, two green building consultants led this group and the AMBS Administrative Cabinet in a two-day charrette. We used a revised version of the library building program and the LEED Rating System to develop a completely new design. Construction began in April 2006, and the library was occupied in August 2007.

The new building is roughly 25,000 square feet on a single floor, with the library occupying about four-fifths of that area. The seminary bookstore and a gallery/lounge are at the entrance to the building. The library uses about half of the 1975 basement (2,800 square feet) for secure storage of lesser-used materials. With the exception of rooms for group study (3), individual study (2), and the Special Collections area, the entire public area is flexible open space. Study tables, carrels, and soft chairs all have outside views. Wireless network access is provided throughout the building, and all seats have power and data connections.

North-facing clerestory windows bring indirect natural light into the stacks. Fluorescent lights controlled by photosensors and occupancy sensors supply illumination only as needed to complement the available daylight. The simple yet elegant décor features natural cherry paneling, trim, and shelf end panels that were handcrafted on site by the AMBS maintenance staff. A geothermal ground source heat pump system provides effective climate control using 75 percent less energy than the average U.S. library, according to 2004 data. The site also features several acres of restored prairie landscape and rain gardens of native plants adjacent to the building to manage storm water runoff.

The project cost about \$6 million. An additional \$1.8 million was raised to endow the cost of operating the new facility. At a cost about \$64,000, the 7group Consulting Firm led the initial two-day charrette, advised throughout

the design and build phases, and also managed the submission of LEED certification documents. In April 2009, the U.S. Green Building Council awarded the building LEED certification to the Gold level; it had earned 47 points out of a possible 69.

Members of the seminary community and visitors have responded enthusiastically to the new building. An online video (<http://www.youtube.com/mennoniteseminary#p/a/u/1/9DnCPvXIO-8>) reveals a student's perspective. Library patron traffic increased 70 percent in the first year, even though the student body had decreased by 18 percent. As more guest users from the community discovered the library, checkouts by this group increased 45 percent. Librarians appreciate the convenient arrangement of resources, offices, and collaborative work space. The former wet basement stack area is now secure closed storage with potential to accommodate decades of future growth. This library will serve the AMBS students, faculty, and guests well beyond the twenty-year planning horizon. Photos of the building are available on the library website, <http://ambs.edu/library/photo-gallery>.

DISCUSSION

1. What was hardest and what was most rewarding about this project?

After three full years of planning, design, and fundraising, I became convinced that we needed to start the design process over, with a specific commitment to making the library a green building. My biggest challenges were undertaking the research necessary to be confident in this conviction and summoning the courage to advocate this new beginning after thousand of dollars had already been spent on the first design.

The satisfying outcome of this radical new beginning was the opportunity to observe professional architects, engineers, designers, builders, and green building consultants collaborate to produce a facility that is beautiful, functional, and sustainable.

2. How was the rest of your work affected by this challenge?

To aid in imagining what features to recommend for the new library, I experimented with space in the original library. Four older computers still adequate for word processing and web browsing were set up in the library basement stacks to encourage research and writing in proximity to the book collection. Reconfigured extra-large carrels with network connections were popular with students even in that drab, windowless, and sometimes damp space. While much of my research and writing for the project was done in the evenings, design meetings and consultations left little time for library work during intense planning periods.

3. Is there one single thing you wish you had done differently?

At the suggestion of a faculty member, two individual 6' x 8' study rooms for visiting scholars were built into remote corners of the north wing. To save money in reinforcing the corners of the building, the exterior windows in these rooms were deleted from the plan. While the lockable door in each room has a half-height window, the space still feel confining compared to the openness of the rest of the north wing. In retrospect, I should have insisted on a window that would have given the occupant a view out into the open library space.

4. What was the single most valuable piece of advice you received for this project?

While recognizing the importance of sustainability, I wasn't sure whether LEED certification from the U.S. Green Building Council was valuable enough to justify the additional work and expense. Marcus Sheffer, our green

building consultant, explained that LEED certification would provide a recognized standard for judging the sustainability of the building. Sheffer also said, "It's not about points. It's about getting the building that satisfies the needs of your organization." With minimal additional expense, we could have achieved LEED platinum level but we are well satisfied with the gold level.

5. What have people responded most favorably to so far?

Visitors typically notice first the spaciousness of the open ceilings and clerestory windows, as well as the warmth and beauty of the cherry trim and paneling. Regular library users value comfortable and convenient places to study, with large windows, soft lounge chairs, and large tables with study lamps. About forty students share twenty-two assigned carrels where they can leave books and lock up valuables. Major collections are clearly visible from the entrance, and librarians can be seen in their offices when assistance is needed.

6. How do you see your library's services being enhanced by this project so far?

With the computer lab housed within the new library, orientation for new students now includes hands-on practice with library databases and a worksheet assignment they must complete for credit in the first-year seminar. The library also provides laptops, so that students may write and do research in close proximity to the print resources. Since using online resources has become essential, students appreciate convenient access to the Internet. Wireless is provided throughout the building. Carrels and tables also have data ports.

7. Other observations of interest.

While the planning and design process was intense, I was unprepared for how much work and decision making would still be required during the seventeen months of construction. Fortunately, we had learned from recent construction activity at Goshen College nearby that the owner is well served by hiring a project manager to represent the institution's interests throughout the process. The AMBS project manager, a retired local builder, was the liaison between all the professionals on the project and the seminary administration. He ensured that the seminary had all the necessary information and that our wishes were carried out. His work allowed seminary administrators to focus on fundraising and gave me time to manage the library.

We had to move the entire book collection twice, once into temporary quarters, and then seventeen months later into the new library. For several years prior to the move, we did as much weeding as possible. We also hired Hallett Movers of Chicago (<http://www.hallettmovers.com>) to relocate the majority of the book collection both times. They had the right equipment to move books up and down stairs. Experienced Hallett professionals hired and supervised our own students, who did most of the physical labor. The library staff still had plenty to do to move some smaller collections. Dozens of volunteers contributed labor at various stages of the project. The library was not closed during either move.

