
Breaking All The Rules: Library Renovation at Catawba College

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Column Editor's Note: *The following interview is fictional. The names of the library, its director, the issues involved, and the decisions made by the librarians and the college during the project, of course, are real and (as far as possible) perfectly accurate, but the interview itself never happened. It is rather a construct, a literary device used to highlight and explain the Catawba Library renovation experience. — SM*

Several of us here at *Against the Grain* recently visited **Catawba College** in Salisbury, North Carolina and its newly renovated and expanded **Corriher-Linn-Black**

Library. We had heard that the renovation was somewhat peculiar — somewhat out of the ordinary. In short, we had been told that the project was largely successful but clearly unorthodox — different from the way libraries were usually remodeled. We wanted to see for ourselves. From what we could discern before our visit, it seemed that **Catawba's** entire approach to its project invited two key questions. First, can you renovate your library on a shoestring and create something beautiful? And secondly, can you break all of the standard renovation rules and get away with it?

We didn't think so, but we couldn't wait

to find out. On a crisp autumn morning we drove up to Salisbury, a small town in the heart of the North Carolina Piedmont, just north of Charlotte to visit the library and to interview its director, **Steve McKinzie**. **Catawba** boasts of a solid curriculum, a nationally-recognized theatre department, a burgeoning athletic program, and now a newly reworked library.

We caught up with the director in his library office that afternoon, an office tucked away on the corner of the library's main floor.

ATG: *Well, Steve, thank you so much for being willing to be interviewed — to take on some of our questions.*

SM: On the contrary, it is an honor to have anything to do with *Against the Grain*. You've a great publication. It is great to have you here.

ATG: *Well, we are certainly impressed with what we've seen here so far. We just now took a tour with one of your librarians. The building looks great. You've a large mezzanine crammed with soft comfortable seating — a spacious information commons and a good many group study rooms.*

SM: Yes, beauty and warmth were some of what we were after. We are all pretty pleased with the results.

ATG: *Can you give us a sense of the project's scope? Try to give our readers an overview of what has been involved. How large was the library? How big is it now? Was it expanded?*

SM: Well, what we did was capitalize on the building's strengths. As you noted, we've a large open reading room area just as you enter the library. It now houses our information commons and reading area that sometimes doubles for receptions. As for the size, the library is about 25,000 square feet — rather small in a way, although the renovation actually expanded our square footage. There had been a small area in the lower level that had been home to computer services. They moved out just prior to the renovation. We took over their space. We've a basement, a main level, and a mezzanine.

ATG: *Did you say 25,000 square feet? That is really rather small for an academic library. It seems much bigger than that.*

SM: Well, you're right. It does seem larger. That's by design. We've very tall ceilings on our main level, as you noticed, and we've a number of tall windows. We took that airy sense of space and highlighted it by adding glass along the mezzanine. We also made sure that the mezzanine study rooms had glass doors and walls, what our architect called a "store front design." That brought in light from the outside and illuminated the building. It was all part of an effort to capitalize on our strengths and to give our public space — the soft seating in the mezzanine, the information commons in the main level, the **Wentz** reading room — a sense of warmth and size. On

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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 Sheffy 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 God-send. 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 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. 🐘

