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## The Importance of Place in Public Space Design

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# The Importance of Place in Public Space Design

Rachel Carr, 2020 Cohort



Don't get me wrong, the new main branch of the Dayton Metro Library is wonderful. It's bright, innovative, and inviting. Mostly, it's well suited for Dayton. This last aspect is something that I hadn't felt until I visited another city's new central library in Austin, Texas. It's easy to see the beauty of the Austin Public Library, and want all of its features for the Dayton Public Library without much thought about the important differences between the cities.

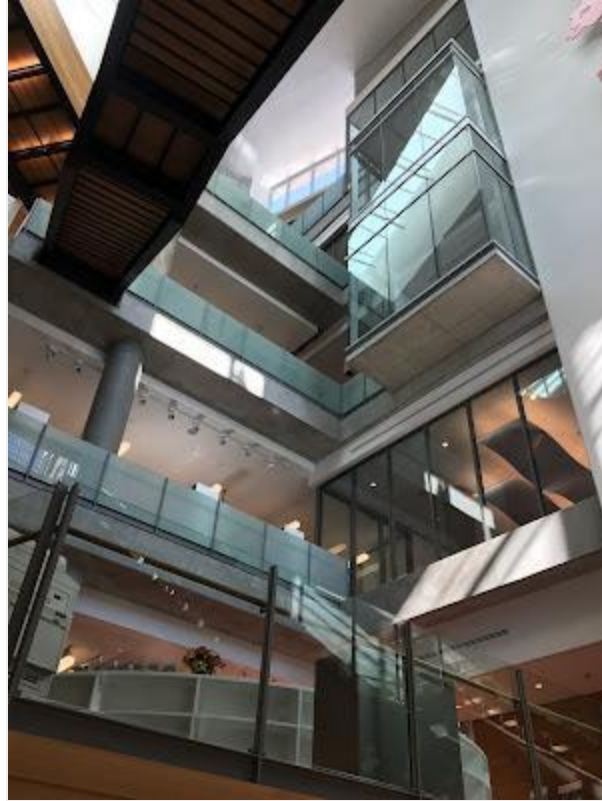
The Austin Public Library Central Branch is more than bright. It's a 6 story vibrant sanctuary, with a "technology petting zoo," listening stations, and three outdoor decks. After my visit, I walked out wondering why Dayton Metro Library main branch didn't also have a rooftop deck.

The envy faded in a few days, and it became clear why these libraries are different and why they should be.



Often the solutions for creating long lasting, sustainable solutions to design are viewed as interchangeable, regardless of location and time. For example when cities look to implement more sustainable transportation solutions, they may find protected bike lanes are an effective, low cost solution. However, does that solution work in Cleveland? Similarly, I naively wished for outdoor decks and a solar paneled green roof. I am writing this back in Dayton, on a not so atypical morning that greeted me with brisk 27 degree winds; the fireplace on the second floor of Dayton’s library now feels like a much better way to bring people together than an outdoor deck.

Another aspect that I envied now stand out in a similar way, like the diversity of media available. In the Austin Public Library there are “listening stations;” like a museum interactive panel, you can selected a radio station, podcast, or other selected form of audio from the menu, put on the attached headphones, and settle into the armchair. If you walk into the Dayton Public Library today, you’re not going to find this feature. But is that such a bad thing? This is not a piece of the infrastructure, it can be added, removed, and is a part the experimental design of Austin’s Library that could easily, in future years, be added to Dayton’s Library. Dayton in the future may have a “technology petting zoo,” too.



There is one feature that Dayton's library is objectively missing: a connection to the river. Just as it's vital that design acknowledges the constraints of place in terms of climate and geography, design should connect people to the environment and history of a place. Rivers tend to do both. An exhibit on the ground floor highlights the life and history of Shoal Creek, which runs through Austin's downtown, and there are vistas on the upper floors that look out over the Colorado River, where the Shoal Creek meets it. Although the Dayton Public Library is nearly as close to its river, the Great Miami River, it does little to acknowledge its existence or highlight its history. As a place of learning, I believe Dayton Metro Library missed an opportunity to include the River in the design, in terms of physical orientation away from the river and lack of educational material on view about it.



The myriad features present in the Austin Public Library are stunning *and* appropriate for a central branch of a metro library system that serves the 2 million person metro area of Austin, the capital of Texas. However, we should hope that the central library of an 800,000 person metro area is very different. The role of each library is as different as it's relationship to the space it is in, in terms of community and environment. As a Daytonian, it would be hard for me to be more proud of the beautiful main branch of the Dayton Metro Library. As an admirer of great public design, I am captivated by the Central Austin Public Library. But as a River Steward, I am left wondering why the connection to the river is lacking in the Dayton's library and what can be done to change that. Austin's overt efforts to connect to the river through the library creates a sense of shared identity and responsibility between those on the water, in the library, and across all public spaces.