The Library: A Contradiction of Purpose by Design
LaShonda Card

The Stark County Library is a place that has something to read for everyone. It is the source of a vast amount of information. The library is designed to cater to all age groups. However, the design in many ways contradicts its rules implicit and written. In some ways, the library discourages others from accomplishing what they set out to do. Although the library has unlimited resources for those who need information, at some point the library can prevent some of the same people from obtaining the information they came to acquire. What happens when a place such as the library, designed to suit a purpose, prevents that purpose from being fulfilled by the same design?

When you walk through the doors, the “Children’s” and “Young Adults’” divisions are immediately to the left. The “Large Print Books” and “Humanities” sections are to the right. As I watched people come in, I saw them follow the intended paths. Those who were older went in the direction of the “Large Print Books” and those who were younger went in the opposite direction. What is ironic is that these two sections attracted people’s attention long enough to influence which way they decided to go, but no one stayed and very few stopped momentarily in either section.

As I looked closer at the layout and the contents of not only these two sections, but also other parts of the library, the irony began to be understood. The area labeled “Large Print Books” had no large print index to go along with it. I assumed, as most would, that this section would be more for senior adults. There was no librarian assigned to this part of the library. Books were shelved as high as six feet. Most elderly people would not be able to reach the books high on the shelves without a stool; there was a lack of a stool or a librarian, the person this area was designed for could have a difficult time finding anything here.

The “Children’s” division was vividly designed for the season with pumpkins, witches, fall leaves, and books to match. Little chairs and tables that stood knee high were scattered around. Shelves were low enough that an average eight-year-old could reach any book. Two librarians stood behind a small desk very attentive and friendly. This section was definitely made for kids, yet no kids were here. I found out later in my observation of the rules that no child can be left unattended under the age of ten. Although the library wants children under supervision at all times, there are not adequate seating arrangements for an adult to be comfortable in the “Children’s” section. This means any child, nine years old or younger, would have to go along to whatever section of the library the adult would choose. This poses a problem for a parent and a child at the library together with separate agendas. I noticed a lady with small children in one of the “No Talking” areas hushing them insistently. The moment she redirected her attention to what she was doing, they went back to what they were doing. I watched this incessant pattern continue for several minutes. She finally left in frustration.

The rules of conduct could only be found in the “Young Adult” section of the library. Yet, the focus was on things that related to adult conduct as well. Security strolled by twice in the fifteen minutes I was there. There were no problems with the teenagers following the rules, in fact one could have heard a pin drop. There was a father sitting with his son and daughter. He seemed mildly disinterested in his surroundings; he was just staring blankly at the pages of a book. It is possible that he also read the rules of conduct and thought it better to accompany his children at all times even though they appeared to be well past the age of required supervision.
I walked to other parts of the library, namely “Periodicals” and “Genealogy,” and there were no rules at all. The average age here ranged from 25-55 years. In the “No Talking” sections of these areas, voices were clearly audible. People moved about freely and spoke freely. The librarians seemed unconcerned about this conduct. Also, this was the only area in the library that was equipped with copiers, microfiche machines, computers with Internet access, and printers. It could stand alone without any interaction with other parts of the library. Most of the elderly people were in the “Genealogy” section and still at the stage of independence. In this section things seemed to be spelled out more clearly. Instead of just posting a sign to let them know not to re-shelf books, the sign also explained the reason for not re-shelving the books. I found this interesting because it contributed to the relaxed non-offensive atmosphere created by the rest of the surroundings.

I began to wonder if the library was trying to send a message. Although the information available in the library caters to all ages, the library itself places restrictions on those who require more help and supervision. The design seemed to confirm this by setting apart those who do not require a lot of assistance. Since the library is for public use, it should make every effort to meet the needs of the public and encourage its use in every way possible. The library could easily set up a “Story Time” section with readings twice an hour to accommodate these adults who have young children with them. There could be someone in the “Large Print” area at all times to assist the elderly who need extra help. The rules of conduct should be posted in all sections of the library, or in one centralized location. If these conflicts were obvious to me and I hardly ever visit here, then these conflicts must also be obvious to those who visit or work here on a regular basis. It is possible that someone inadvertently designed the structure this way and deliberately refuses to conform the design to meet the needs of the people who use this space today. Does it have anything to do with the fact that groups being most affected are young children and very senior adults, the same groups who are overlooked in society and government?