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CREATING A NEW MUSEUM SPACE

By Karen DePauw, manager, IHS Local History Services

Although some of us have been in our museum buildings for decades, others are building new or refurbishing existing buildings into museum spaces. But when faced with all of the potential a new building, or a new-to-you building, holds where do you begin? This month we will take a look at some things to consider when building a new museum...whether that is retrofitting your current building, refurbishing a different building, or building new from the ground up.



[100 North Senate Avenue](#). (City of Indianapolis, Department of Metropolitan Development, Indiana Historical Society)

One of the first things to consider is space. How much space will be allocated to collections storage, offices, exhibits, and research/work areas (whether for visitors or volunteers working with collection items)? Consider what you need now, but also what you might need in the future. When determining space needs, constantly keep your mission in mind. A mission based in preservation might require more storage space, while a mission primarily focused on education might need more room for

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educational programs and school groups.

Collection storage is always a big part of planning a new museum space. Our collections are constantly growing, so if you currently need 5000 square feet* for collections storage and you only allocate 5000 sq ft, then the month after you move into the new space you will already be at capacity. It is easier to plan for more storage now than try to squeeze it out in the future. Additionally, think of where you need each of those spaces to be in relation to one another. The biggest danger to certain types of collection items is breakage from movement and handling, so try not to put the research/work area on the opposite side of the building from storage. If collections constantly need moved from place to place for simple work tasks, the potential of breakage increases exponentially.

When thinking of your physical storage space think both as a whole but also in parts. If you need 5000 sq ft of storage do not assume that multiple spaces adding up to 5000 sq ft is the same thing. For instance, a bunch of large closets and small rooms spread around the building might look fine on paper because they add up to 5000 sq ft, but how useful is a 300 sq ft room for storing furniture? Think about how you store the collection and what size spaces that means. When you break it down further it might be that you need 5000 sq ft if it is one giant all-inclusive storage area, but broken down you determine you would need 1500 sq ft for archives, 2000 sq ft for furniture, 1500 for textiles and boxed homewares, and 1000 for small miscellaneous items, equaling 6000 sq ft if the spaces need to be broken up. Having a plan for each (one storage area or multiple) can help, especially if working with an architect on a new build as they may see the total sq footage and just put it wherever they can fit it into the plan.



[Construction of Herschel Miller Home, 4200 E. 71st St., 1952.](#) (Indiana Historical Society, P0385)

Next, think about infrastructure for the building and how it relates to the spaces. There might be different needs for fire suppression in exhibit and storage areas than there are in office spaces or rooms meant for rentals and meetings. Same goes for lighting or HVAC needs. The needs are likely different in areas where collections are the primary concern as opposed to areas where visitors are the primary concern. Can the HVAC system be zoned and easily controlled for the varying levels of comfort? In the same vein, consider the weight load of certain areas of the building. Storage areas need to bear the load of the storage furniture (powder coated shelves, compact shelving, etc.) as well as the load of all of the collection items and their packaging. Make sure your architect is very

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aware of where these things will be stored so that floors and structural elements can be reinforced where needed. Even if you cannot afford compact shelving now, it is far easier and cheaper to reinforce a floor while it is being built than to go in and do it later.

Be informed of where water and waste pipes will run through the building. If it is unavoidable to have them running through areas where collections will live, make sure every possible precaution is made, such as double wrapping them or installing back-up pipes. All of these things are cheaper in the long term than doing conservation on dozens of objects if there is a problem. Consider it a risk management investment and see if there are others you need to consider.



[Interior of New Peoples State Bank, Berne, Indiana.](#) (Indiana Historical Society, P0391)

Keep end use in mind when considering finishes and final touches on the space. Carpet squares are better than rolled carpet in public spaces as they are easier to clean and replace. If you go this route, buy a few extra carpet squares so you have some in case they stop making that style but you need to replace one. While marble is an elegant floor choice, it is a soft stone and stains and dents easily, perhaps not the best finishing for a space that has heavy collections pieces displayed on it or receptions with red wine.

And do not forget to get the important people at the table from the very beginning and make sure they understand what you do and the mission of your organization. Having the fire marshal, and electrician, the architect, and contractor all on the same page as far as general museum needs go will help in the long run as they combine their knowledge of what you do with what they do to create a fantastic space. If you think of your current needs and possible future desires every step of the way, you will end up with a space properly preserving the past, necessary for the present, and prepared for the future.



[Flanner House Home Construction](#). (Indiana Historical Society, M0513)

*This number is used solely as an example and is in no way a recommendation as to how much collections storage space should be allocated in a museum. The amount of storage needed varies widely and storage space should be based on your museums collection and rate of collecting.

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