

# Types of Community Centers

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Some communities, normally the larger ones, have looked realistically at the recreation needs of their residents and have improved their summer recreation programs to a sophisticated level. They have also determined that the recreational needs of their citizens do not stop merely because summer ends and children return to school. Although the school provides some additional opportunities during the school year, by and large the majority of the recreation programming for the community is offered during the summer. It is unrealistic to assume that people with recreational needs during the summer do not have similar needs, perhaps of a different kind, during the remainder of the year.

The expanding public interest in recreation activities during fall, winter and spring and the increasing development of year-round recreation programs have created a demand for buildings for indoor recreation. As you might expect, buildings used for recreation take a variety of forms. Facilities such as schools, city halls, churches, VFW halls and others are used in many cases because other facilities are not available. It is an unusual community that has not considered the need for a recreation center. Such a facility is a worthwhile addition to the community.

Let us look at the types of centers used in today's municipalities.

**The Teen Center.** As the term implies, the teen center is a facility

primarily for junior high and high school youth. It usually has an area for dancing, a snack bar and an area for ping pong, billiards and perhaps one or more meeting rooms. More than likely the building is a renovated or vacant store or other facility that has been acquired at minimal or no cost. Teen center facilities rise and fall in popularity. Over time, they may be located in several different places.

**The Recreation Center.** This building provides indoor recreation space for a number of activities. It could include a teen center. It usually has at least one room – perhaps a gymnasium – that accommodates large groups. Regardless of its size or type, the center also houses an office, restrooms, kitchenette, storeroom, meeting room and other related utility spaces. The building is seldom used for activities other than recreation although outside groups may use the meeting room, the gymnasium or large assembly room.

**Community Center.** The community or neighborhood center may incorporate some or all of the functions and activities of the teen center and/or recreation center. However, it serves several additional functions, with recreation not necessarily the prime one. The building may house health and social services. It probably will serve a wider variety of age groups, including senior citizens, and can serve a number of other community functions. The term neighborhood center, although sometimes associated with community center, may imply a

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primary function of social and health services, meeting space, etc., for a neighborhood. Recreation functions may be much lower on the list of priorities.

**Civic Center.** Civic center buildings may incorporate any or all of the functions and activities of the community center, the neighborhood center, the recreation center and the teen center. Normally, it also includes city offices, perhaps a theater and other citywide offices or functions. Civic centers are usually large facilities, which may serve a number of unrelated functions simultaneously.

## The Recreation Center

Survey the recreation programs provided in the community through various agencies. And gather information concerning the types of programs the agencies say are needed in the community. Determine whether or not the agencies see the need for the recreation center, and if so, what activities should take place there. An analysis of the unmet needs of local organizations and of the desires of individuals and groups for indoor activities is a valuable tool, for it reveals features that are most desired in the new building.

Then survey existing buildings and recreation facilities to determine whether or not an additional facility is needed.

In some communities the majority of the recreational needs may be met if the schools and other public and privately owned buildings suitable for recreation were used fully. A separate recreation building is indeed an admirable goal. However, those involved should realistically and objectively evaluate whether or not the schools could provide a large portion of the facilities needed if their facilities were available. There is little question that such use is much more efficient in terms of taxpayer dollars and reduces the overall cost of maintenance, utilities and staff in the long run.

A careful appraisal of local needs before building plans are developed prevents duplication of expensive facilities. And it assures the recreation features that are most desired and needed in the community will be considered in the building plans.

Three items must be considered at an early stage:

- the probability of securing funds for the construction, operation, and maintenance of the building;
- the likelihood of its successful operation; and
- the most effective means of managing it.

By enlisting the cooperation of the community in a study of local needs and in the preparation of

building plans, more widespread community support is assured if surveys indicate construction is needed.

## Remodeling to Provide Centers

Depending upon the needs which are to be served, some communities have developed recreation centers in large old houses, vacant stores, warehouses and other buildings obtained at little or no cost, and remodeled as a recreation building. While this method has some advantages, such as reduced cost and more immediate availability, it also has some disadvantages. The cost of remodeling to adapt a facility may be expensive. And most contractors are reluctant to bid on remodeling jobs because determining the actual costs involved is difficult. Usually you have to make do with what you have. The building may be easily adaptable to what is needed. On the other hand, it may be a rather inefficient use of space that is difficult to supervise. Also, the location may not be completely desirable. It may be in the wrong area of town to be accessible or may be downtown where no parking is available.

## Consider the Costs

Almost every municipality, of course, dreams of constructing a new community center. The advantages are obvious:

- it can be planned to meet the needs indicated,
- it can be located at the best possible site,
- it can be designed in different shapes and sizes, and
- it can be used for a number of functions.

However it is expensive to finance. Many communities make the mistake of only looking at the capital costs of construction, overlooking the annual cost of maintenance. That cost must be met year after year.

If costs are a factor, eliminating some "niceties" may be necessary. Construction materials and types of buildings range from costly brick or limestone used with fine hardwoods and a lot of glass to inexpensive cinder block or metal type buildings. Although metal or concrete block buildings will not be as aesthetically pleasing as brick, they will reduce the total cost greatly.

Gym floors could be concrete rather than hardwood. They could be covered with vinyl with inlaid game lines. Bleacher areas and spacious lobbies could be eliminated.

The financial situation of the community determines the type and construction of the facility.

Even more money may be needed. To make full use of the facility, a part-time or even full-time, year-

round staff person may be required. This raises the cost significantly.

Generally, municipal recreation buildings are constructed and operated with municipal tax funds. These funds are provided for by the local appropriating authority to the recreation department. Items in the operating budget of a recreation center are:

- Salaries and wages of leadership and maintenance personnel
- Utilities (light, water, gas, sewer)
- Recreation and office supplies
- Janitorial supplies
- Repairs and maintenance

## The Site

Accessibility is an important factor in site selection. It should be located close to the primary users. Suitable parking space on or near the site is essential. Locating the recreation building near the center of the district to be served is best. But a location a block or so away from the main street or business center may be better than one on a main thoroughfare where traffic congestion and noise are likely to be greater. Other things being equal, it is normally better to locate the recreation center in a park area, as part of a "recreation complex." The complex offers ease of supervision, multiple activity options and joint use of restrooms, lights and parking areas. A complex also makes a variety of programs available in the same location for different age groups. The recreation center can indeed make an attractive addition to a community park. The availability of utilities, water mains and sewer lines is also an important consideration.

## Determine Functions First

Once it has been determined that a new building will be constructed, its purposes and uses should be determined prior to the preparation of any building plan. Sad, but true, many such buildings have been elaborately designed and constructed, only to find that they are difficult to maintain and to supervise and that their design means some activities cannot be programmed. It cannot be overstated: Determine the function the building is to serve first, before the plans are drawn. So many times the building is built then leaders decide what types of activities it will allow. The function of the structure is primarily to provide space for desired recreational activities. Therefore, it

is of utmost importance that any community considering a building determine at an early stage just what activities should be provided. Activities in community recreation buildings vary widely depending on local interests and needs. However, a few of the activities most commonly conducted in multi-purpose recreation buildings include:

- **Athletic and Sports** – such as basketball, badminton, bowling, volleyball, archery, shuffleboard, ping pong, gymnasium classes and physical stunts.
- **Drama and Music** – concerts, plays, operas, minstrel shows, pageants and rehearsals and informal activities by music and drama organizations.
- **Entertainments and Social Recreation** – movies, game parties, square dancing, stunt nights, amateur shows, social dancing, holiday parties and celebrations.
- **Exhibits** – hobby shows, garden exhibits, sports demonstrations, craft exhibits, scout rallies and art exhibitions.
- **Club Activities** – meetings of arts, crafts, music, social, scouting, athletic, drama and hobby clubs and groups.
- **Banquets and Luncheons** – for clubs and organizations as well as for groups meeting in the building.
- **Quiet Games** – checkers, chess, cards and a variety of table games.
- **Meetings** – lectures, forums, civic meetings, discussion groups and committee meetings of various kinds.

## Functional Design

Good design demonstrates the function of a building. Too often emphasis has been placed upon the exterior appearance of the building with little regard for functional use. Floor plans should be carefully worked out before embellishing the exterior walls that will enclose them. A building should be designed from within and not from without.

An architect, preferably one who is experienced in designing buildings of this type, should be employed to prepare plans. Regardless of the architect's experience, the collaboration of a recreation specialist in the formulation of the plans is essential. Functional

design taxes the ingenuity and imagination of the planner because problems of supervision, maintenance and conduct of the activities must be taken into account in determining the physical layout of the building. Every part of the structure – room, corridor, stairway, fixture – has a specific function to perform. Determining the size, form and arrangement of these elements for the most economical and efficient use is functional design.

If capital funds for construction are limited, the principle of multiple use should be given increased attention. Through the use of foldup tables for pool, ping pong and banquets; chair dollies, etc.; and handy storage areas of suitable size, a smaller number of rooms can be made to serve a larger number of functions. However, such a design requires a higher expenditure for maintenance and supervision because equipment has to be moved in and out, and extra time is needed to set up. Still, if the building is to be built on a limited budget, this may be a necessity.

## Visit Other Centers

The committee making recommendations to the architect should visit as many recreation centers as possible before meeting with the architect. These visits are very important, and the cost may be less than one-tenth of one percent of the total cost of the facility. This helps you avoid the mistakes of others. Visit with the center supervisor and/or director of recreation and parks to find out what they like or dislike about the facility and what they would change if they had the opportunity. Take notes during each visit for easy recall.

## Leadership

Leadership more than any other factor determines the success of a recreation building. Without competent leadership, a building cannot fully serve its purpose. In fact, it may even become a liability. To maximize the greatest return on the investment and the greatest benefits from the building, competent leadership is necessary. No community should erect a building unless it can find a qualified director and other leadership personnel.

The arrangement of rooms and facilities can simplify the task of a building staff. Partial glass partitions between rooms often make it easy for the leader to know what is happening in various parts of the building without making a tour of inspection. On the other hand, excess corridor space, poor circulation and scattered facilities increase the problems of supervision and should be avoided. Each room should have direct access so that activities are not interrupted by people passing through one room to get to another. A clear understanding of the type of program and activities planned for the new structure is needed to design and construct a building in which the problems of supervision are minimized. The fact that leadership is of primary importance in no sense minimizes the contribution that wise planning makes to the problem of efficient supervision and operation.

Supervision is facilitated by a limited number of entrances and by the proper location of the office. Providing a gate in the corridor leading to shower and locker rooms restricts access to these rooms. Outside doors leading to them can be locked except during specified periods of use.