

## **THE FAIRFIELD LIBRARY, ALMOST HERE. AND SPLENDID.**

**By Daniel B. England**

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At the center of the town of Fairfield is a library. Not a Wal-Mart. Not a police station. Not even a town hall. A library, heavy with 275,000 books that anchor its residents' collective soul.

The newly renovated library is also light with openness, like an educated mind. It is 1903, in a stunningly restored periodical room, with fireplace and mahogany and a mosaic floor uncovered now, a gleaming tessellation. It is 2005, with seamless wireless Internet connections and a children's library with entrance through a little door that makes you wish you were 6 again. It's a place you will take visitors, a place where you will spend hours, a place to retreat for a time from all the madness.

At the moment, it's still a bit of a mess, like the day you move into someplace new. But in trailing around with town librarian Tom Geoffino it's also a place of discovery even for him. "These chairs," he says pointing to some beautifully crafted classic wingbacks that look for all the world like they were just delivered by Thomas Chippendale "were refurbished by prisoners of the state correctional facility. They just came in today. I haven't seen them before." He settles into one in a little room with a bow window through which you can see the town passing by. For a moment, he rests from his frenetic pace of the last few months, as if anticipating the quiet contemplation of a reader lost in a book. "It's just amazing," he says at last.

The circulation desk through the main (side) entrance on Old Post Road is an expanse of granite and wood. Behind it are rooms for staff to work; in front of it, a view of a sublime art gallery, now empty but soon to be filled with exhibits lasting a month or more, organized by knowledgeable Friends of the library. The reference room is a Google of volumes cheerfully looked after by Valerie Fredericks, who when asked what was her favorite part of the renovation, pointed away from her own area back to the periodical room, the oldest part of the library previously entombed as staff offices. "It's the jewel of the whole building," she says. "But I like this room too." Well she should. Air and light, wood tables, sturdy comfortable chairs, discreet Internet connections, shelves of books everywhere.

There's a teen room, funky and welcoming, not yet fitted with the cone pods that will allow for private listening to music. There are study rooms, some large for groups, some quiet and small, one with a preserved fireplace. There is a meeting room, ordinary except for leaded glass rescued from the old section. There is a computer lab and a Memorial Room, with its gold leaf names of Revolutionary heroes, now properly lit. The fireplace there, and one downstairs, still needs a flue to become alight, but Geoffino is certain someone will provide for that to be done.

The renovation cost \$11.9 million, and has come in on budget and on time. Well, nearly. Geoffino admits the grand opening may have to be put off a week or so to make sure all the details of the place are right. As we tour, his phone rings constantly, each call a new worry about something to be delivered, checked on, organized or corrected. “The other day, it was so hot the irrigation pipe for the flowers started smoldering.” He looks down at the spot. “Who would have anticipated that?” Meanwhile, a man from the company that made all the outside brick match approaches Geoffino with sign-off papers. It seems the brick from 1903, the addition of 1929, the renovation of 1958, the work of 1979 and the new construction this year didn’t all match. Small wonder. Now they do. “It’s a detail, but without the Trustees deciding to put that right, the building wouldn’t have looked good,” Geoffino says. “Now, it looks great.”

The most wondrous part of the new renovation, perhaps, is the 10,000 square foot children’s library that is organized into Fairfield “neighborhoods.” “We thought the space could be overwhelming for little kids,” says Barbara Hawkins, Children’s Librarian, “so we divided it up into spaces with Fairfield landmarks.” The entrance is through a gazebo reminiscent of the one on Sherman Green. Straight ahead is the children’s library circulation desk with its version of the Pequot Lighthouse centering the room. A door to the right takes you to the stacks for older kids, where tables are ready for computers. To the left is a tiny (40”) door that will immediately delight kids (“They’ll think ‘this place is for me!’” says Hawkins) which takes little ones to the Birth-to-Three Farm, which will be full of all sorts of tactile adventures. Slightly older children get their own space too, complete with whispering tubes that capture a whispered secret here and snake it through colorful tubes for delivery to a waiting ear in another part of the room.

The trees in the “town green” will change color with the seasons as kids wander in and out of a small replica of the town hall. Lots of multimedia activities here. Then there’s the purple Puppet Mansion where kids can learn to tell stories, and a bookstore, and a country store, a train roundhouse and a fish tank... Anyway, you can get a preview tour of all that’s planned at [www.fairfieldlibrary.org/child-tour.htm](http://www.fairfieldlibrary.org/child-tour.htm).

Back in the disabled-accessible stacks, Tom Geoffino is sweeping his hand in the air to indicate the huge windows that let light flood in helping to create an open and accessible atmosphere. “The old library was a bit gloomy,” he recalls. Then he is at pains to point out a detail of design here or a grace note of carving there that combine to give the rooms a feeling of graciousness. “It’s all very new,” he says “but with enough of the original preserved to give people a sense of the history of the place and of the town.”

He has kudos for the library building committee, the trustees, the Friends, AP Construction, and his staff. “Everyone has worked so hard for thirteen months,” he says, “and now it’s almost done.”

So the town of Fairfield will still have at its center a library, but one transformed now into a very modern version of *gravitas* from which all can draw.

