THE cost OF NEGLECT

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In towns and cities across the country, public libraries stand as pillars of equity, education, and civic life. They anchor communities where children discover books, job seekers access the internet, immigrants prepare for citizenship, and lifelong learners connect through programs. Yet the library's role as a vibrant hub increasingly faces one of its greatest threats: the condition of the building itself.

For many library systems, aging infrastructure, deferred maintenance, and years of underinvestment have taken their toll. When facilities deteriorate, the damage spreads—reducing public use, harming the library's reputation, limiting funding, and pushing the institution to the margins of local government.

Even as librarians and directors modernize services and design innovative programming, they often undermine their own efforts by giving buildings low priority. Budget constraints, competing responsibilities, and ingrained culture all contribute. But deferring repairs or neglecting facilities sends a clear message: innovation matters, the building does not. Over time, this disconnect erodes trust and weakens the impact of even the best-designed services.

Deteriorating Facilities Drive Down Circulation and Visitors

The library's physical environment directly shapes whether people use it. Outdated spaces with poor lighting, weak ventilation, or visible disrepair tell the public this is not a place of care, innovation, or safety. Patrons quickly turn away from damaged flooring, flickering lights, broken seating, or nonfunctional restrooms. In colder regions, unreliable heating leaves buildings uncomfortable. In warmer ones, broken air conditioning can render entire wings unusable for months.

The connection between space and use is not abstract. When a midsized public library in the Midwest replaced outdated carpet, upgraded lighting, and renovated restrooms, circulation rose 18 percent within two years, and program attendance nearly doubled. Families who had stopped attending storytimes returned. Seniors who had avoided the space because of poor lighting came back.

By contrast, libraries that delay maintenance often see usage plummet. A leaking roof in one Southern city forced the library to rope off an entire wing for months. Although staff worked hard to provide services elsewhere, circulation dropped by 30 percent during that period. Patrons, once lost, often do not return.

Renovations tell a different story. Studies consistently show that when libraries upgrade their facilities, circulation and attendance rise sharply. Clean, modern, accessible spaces draw people in. But when the building declines, usage falls—even when services remain strong.

Unsafe Buildings Invite Misuse

Neglected facilities often attract unintended use. Broken locks, failing security systems, and dim exterior lighting invite vandalism, theft, and loitering. Libraries must remain open and inclusive, but they must also ensure families, students, and seniors feel safe inside.

The presence of security risks not only deters potential users but also undermines staff morale. A library director in California reported that staff injuries due to unsafe flooring resulted in workers' compensation claims, higher insurance costs, and staff turnover. These hidden expenses consume budgets that could otherwise support programs or collections.

Unaddressed safety hazards lead to staff injuries, more calls to police or first responders, and growing public concern. Once the library becomes known as unsafe or chaotic, parents stop bringing children, seniors stop attending programs, and community confidence collapses.

Libraries that invest in security and upkeep, however, see the opposite effect. Improved lighting, well-maintained entrances, and functioning surveillance systems create a perception of care and safety. That perception itself becomes a form of community reassurance.

Declining Usage Metrics Trigger Budget Cuts

Circulation, visitor counts, and program attendance drive most funding decisions. City governments, state agencies, and donors use these statistics to allocate resources. When poor facilities suppress usage, decision-makers may wrongly assume community interest has faded.

Deferred maintenance also carries compounding costs. A small leak left unattended can become a structural crisis, threatening electrical systems or collections. Mold remediation, asbestos abatement, or structural reinforcement can cost millions—expenses far greater than early interventions.

One New England library illustrates the danger. A leaking skylight, left unrepaired for years, caused water damage that eventually required a $2.5 million emergency repair project. Had the skylight been addressed earlier, the cost would have been less than $100,000.

Funding bodies rarely distinguish between low usage caused by poor facilities and low usage caused by lack of community interest. Without context, decision-makers often scale back library budgets, further weakening the institution's ability to respond. This cycle of decline—neglect, reduced usage, budget cuts—becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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Neglect Damages the Library's Image

Libraries symbolize education, civic progress, and public investment. A neglected building tarnishes that image. Patrons question the library's professionalism, reliability, and relevance. In an era when libraries must justify themselves against digital alternatives, the optics of a crumbling building are especially damaging.

Image matters. Donors are less likely to contribute to institutions that look abandoned or neglected. Volunteers gravitate toward organizations that inspire pride. Even staff recruitment suffers when prospective employees see outdated, poorly maintained facilities.

Outdated facilities suggest to residents that the city no longer values the library. This perception affects not only patron engagement but also staff morale, donor interest, and partnership opportunities. By contrast, a well-kept library inspires civic pride, volunteerism, and community ownership.

Libraries that invest in visible upgrades—like new windows, bright interiors, or welcoming entrances—often benefit from renewed media coverage and community buzz. The building itself becomes a marketing tool.

Libraries Lose Ground in Civic Planning

Libraries that fail to present themselves as vital civic spaces risk being sidelined in municipal planning. When city leaders discuss economic development, education, or smart-city initiatives, neglected libraries rarely make the list of viable partners.

Yet libraries can play pivotal roles. A well-maintained facility can serve as a climate resilience hub during extreme heat or cold, a technology center for job seekers, a childcare partner for schools, or a neutral space for civic engagement.

Examples abound. During the 2021 Texas freeze, libraries that had invested in backup power and HVAC systems became emergency warming centers. In New York, renovated branch libraries serve as after-school learning hubs, filling gaps left by overburdened schools. But these roles require reliable infrastructure.

When libraries cannot maintain their own spaces, city leaders hesitate to entrust them with broader responsibilities. A crumbling building does more than inconvenience patrons—it sidelines the library from the larger civic table.

Neglect Sends the Wrong Message

Ignoring a library's physical condition is never neutral. It tells the community, the staff, and future generations that the library does not matter. But investment in buildings affirms that knowledge, safety, and public service remain civic priorities.

The effects ripple outward. Neglect produces declining circulation, eroded trust, strained budgets, and fading relevance. Care and investment, by contrast, create magnets for engagement, symbols of civic pride, and multipliers of public good.

The time to act is now—before buildings fall too far into disrepair and, with them, the chance to restore libraries to their rightful place at the heart of civic life.

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From Neglect to Stewardship: Action Steps

The good news is that neglect is not inevitable. Communities can take practical, proactive steps to protect libraries and restore them as vibrant civic spaces. The first and most important step is education.

1. Educate Staff, Boards, and the Public

Invest in ongoing training for staff, boards, and trustees to understand building systems, maintenance cycles, and capital planning. Workshops and webinars can help staff connect facilities directly to service outcomes. Public education campaigns also build voter and donor awareness, reinforcing that buildings matter as much as programs.

Example: The Library of Virginia launched statewide training on facility management, helping directors learn how to write maintenance schedules and capital requests. Libraries that participated reported greater confidence when presenting to city councils and improved success in securing funds.

2. Conduct Regular Facility Assessments

Schedule annual inspections to identify maintenance needs early. Maintain a facility profile that documents warranties, system details, and compliance requirements so future leaders have a reliable roadmap.

Example: One California library created a digital facility profile that included blueprints, inspection records, and vendor contacts. When a new director was hired, she could immediately see what systems were under warranty, saving both time and money.

3. Prioritize Preventive Maintenance

Create a preventive maintenance plan for HVAC, roofing, lighting, and safety systems. Proactive care keeps costs predictable and avoids the downward spiral of emergency repairs.

Example: A Florida library saved $80,000 in one fiscal year by contracting for quarterly HVAC inspections rather than waiting for costly emergency breakdowns.

4. Integrate Facilities into Strategic Planning

Place facilities at the center of the library's strategic plan. Treat the building as essential infrastructure, not a background cost.

Tip: Every strategic plan should include a section on capital needs and a schedule for future upgrades. This keeps facilities visible at the policy level.

5. Engage the Public in Capital Planning

Involve the community in discussions about building needs through forums, surveys, and design charrettes. Transparency fosters trust and strengthens support for funding requests.

Example: A library in Oregon invited residents to tour its failing HVAC system before proposing a bond measure. Seeing the rusted pipes firsthand persuaded voters to approve funding.

6. Leverage Partnerships and Grants

Seek grants and partnerships with schools, health agencies, and workforce organizations. These collaborations not only broaden funding opportunities but also expand the library's role as shared civic space.

Example: A Midwest library partnered with its local health department to create a wellness room during a renovation, using grant funding that would not have been available to the library alone.

7. Track and Report Usage Data with Context

Pair attendance and circulation statistics with facility-condition reports. Show that dips in use reflect building limitations, not declining public demand.

Tip: Include facility status in board packets alongside usage statistics. This reinforces the connection between the building and the services it supports.

8. Promote the Library as Civic Infrastructure

Position the library as a critical partner in municipal planning. Highlight its role in workforce development, climate resilience, and civic participation. A strong facility ensures these roles can flourish.

Example: During a city council meeting, one library director emphasized that her building served as the only ADA-accessible community space in the district. Framing the library as infrastructure—not just culture secured additional capital dollars.

By putting education first and following through with consistent planning, libraries can shift from reactive crisis management to proactive stewardship. Investment in facilities does more than preserve buildings—it secures the library's role as a trusted, essential institution at the heart of civic life.