

## Why the New Building Matters

By Lori Neid

We've started raising money to build a new Library and Cultural Arts Center in downtown Columbus. While the dozens of campaign volunteers and our first generous donors are obviously in support of this building project, which will house the public library, a new art gallery, and abundant public meeting spaces, we know there are some in our community who don't necessarily support building a new building. Some are even questioning the need for a library when "e-books are replacing printed books" (not true) and "everyone gets to the Internet on their phones" (also not true). Others believe the arts are "nice," but hardly essential. I'd like to go out on a limb and say that even if you (gulp) pitched the printed materials, or unplugged the computers, or told the artists to go elsewhere, Columbus still needs this inviting, modern building in the city center. It will be a vibrant hub, open seven days a week, welcoming regulars and visitors alike. The new building will serve as our "community living room" and it will showcase the value we put on people and quality of life.

To explain the "third place" or "community living room" concept, I turn to Ray Oldenburg, an American urban sociologist known for writing about the importance of informal public gathering spaces. Oldenburg, and other sociologists, have learned that even though most of us spend the majority of our time at home (a "first place") and work (a "second place"), people also benefit from being able to go to a "third place" in their free time. These third places, also known as community living rooms, connect people to the community.

Think of the old-time barber shops where men used to gather to discuss events of the day, or the group of regulars who famously hung out at the bar in the TV show Cheers. Consider today how many people will relax, or even work, in a crowded coffee house. Third places function as our homes away from home. Inhabitants say they feel the same feeling of warmth and belonging in a third place as they do in their own home, but unlike a private residence, these are public spaces that bring us together.

So, while our new Library and Cultural Arts Center will have all the tech bells and whistles that come with having a modern library, and it will be staffed with experts who can help us find what we're looking for on the shelves or on the web, and it will have lots of meeting areas and quiet spaces, as well as programs and art to inspire us and attract visitors to town, even with offering all of that, we may actually get the biggest bang for our buck from the new brick-and-mortar building we'll construct. Space matters and the existing 137-year old office building doesn't cut it anymore. We need to build this modern building to help keep our community members connected and newcomers interested in what we have to offer here in Columbus. We're building a proper community living room that we will all want to call our own.