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## Planning a map room

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LAST WEEK the Boston Public Library announced a \$7.1 million gift from the real estate developer Norman Leventhal to build a new map room. The plan is for a 10,000-square-foot space that combines cutting-edge mapping technology and classic architecture, suiting its proposed home on the third floor of the library's 1895 McKim Building on Copley Square with its grand murals and marble-lined floors and walls.

The map room will resurrect a tradition. The library had such a room when it opened in 1895, but it closed 75 years later, according to library president Bernard Margolis.

It can seem odd to have a map room in a library where one of the great pleasures is getting lost -- among shelves of books in the newer Johnson Building or wandering beneath the mosaic-tiled ceilings in the McKim Building, past its marble lions, or out under the arcaded promenade of the courtyard.

But the map room also promises a chance to get lost in a world of maps that offer information and insight and exist as works of art. The map room will house Leventhal's gift of maps as well as the library's collection, which is in storage and includes a map of the world from the 1400s -- or as much of the world as the mapmaker knew.

Virtual maps and mapping technology will also be part of the map room. Margolis would like to give library visitors access to handheld global positioning devices to popularize the technology. He also hopes to tap data held at the Boston Foundation, Tufts University, Northeastern University, and the University of Massachusetts to create maps that mix data and geography. An example is the Boston Foundation's indicators project, which uses maps to cross-reference factors like where children live and where cultural organizations are located.

A director and a curator have already been hired. Margolis expects to hire two more staff people. Renovations and construction should take five years. And the library has to raise \$4 million to match Leventhal's \$7.1 million gift. Even before the map room opens, Margolis has plans to feature exhibits, an Internet component, and educational programs.

The key task for the library will be outreach. The map room should be used by everyone from scholars to schoolchildren. That means offering training and curriculums to help teachers use its resources and bringing in students so they can benefit from a multidisciplinary education that mixes geography, social studies, politics, economics, drafting, and computer-assisted design. College students might design special majors drawing on the map room's holdings.

The library has the vision and the will. Now it needs partnerships with other institutions -- and funding. A dilemma of modern life is how to digest the vast mountains of available information. The map room should be an engaging solution. ■

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