More Than Just a 'storehouse' of Knowledge : Library Design and the Facilitation of Relationship

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Designing a library is more than just creating a space to house books, computers, customers, and staff. Compare the Laurentian Library in Florence, designed by Michelangelo in 1525 to house the collections of the Medici family, with the new Seattle Public Library, designed by Koolhaas. The libraries are images of their time – the former a grandiose impediment to access by lesser mortals, while the Koolhaas is a building that is transparent. The buildings were designed to reflect the nature of the society in which they exist. Why? Because libraries not only hold the history of a society and culture, but the way they are used at any time is responsive to a society and its values.

Writing about the development of the Polytechnic Institute of New York Library, Richard Sweeney commented "The truth is there's still a lot of guessing that goes on with developing tomorrow's library" (Sweeney 1984) Twenty years later we realise he made some good decisions – like allowing space for a growth in micro-computers. He also talked about "the library beyond walls". When we talk about library design, I think we are entering the world of multiple personality disorders. Consider what we see in today's library (depending first, of course, on whether we are in the 'virtual' library or the 'real' library. I would like to see them much more of a single-looking identity.)

Our new 'real' library is, first of all, an architect's dream opportunity. Libraries have a history of being a 'place' – a place beyond just a book store. Think of the Library at Alexandria (old and new) and the 19th century School of Arts Libraries throughout

the world. Perhaps that very sense of 'libraryness' – the entrance, the desk, the rows and rows of "intelligence" – is what alienates a lot of people, and particularly in Australia, indigenous people. For those of us trying to get them into the knowledge, the building is a barrier. We design grand, large scale buildings for people to work in solitude. We need space for books yet most libraries have a large atrium area, which is effectively wasted space. Even though somewhere in our mind the library is a storage space (for books, information, and computers) for some reason we also have this image of the library as a place where people meet a tradition.

With the advent of the computer age, we building-type, statistics-wielding librarians are feeling threatened. Although the use of our online resources skyrockets, the physical use of the library as a library is dropping. The crowds using our books are thinning out.

In an article about the development of library-museum hybrids, Juris Dilevko and Lisa Gottlieb of the University of Toronto look at how the library community has addressed the reduction

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in book use by emphasizing the importance of the library as a physical space. Hence, we have the now-ubiquitous (or is that iniquitous?) library cafes, plush chairs, dancing classes, seminars, art galleries, magic shows and yoga lessons in public libraries. In the Texas Christian University, library traffic doubled after major renovations – but circulation continued to fall . Are we bribing people to come into our parlours?

Just as public libraries are reinventing themselves with free internet and activities to bring in the crowds, we at universities are providing computer labs, multimedia production facilities and information commons to give our students online

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access – as much as *we* can afford. We offer group study rooms, multipurpose learning spaces. What has this got to do with libraries? Part of the nature of a library is not just as a 'storehouse' of knowledge, but is also about creating and facilitating a relationship between its customers and that knowledge. I use the word 'knowledge' intentionally. I think we fail in not making that relationship evident enough. For example in our plans at Stage 2, we intended to create a physical space where, within a subject area, books and online resources, journals, group study tables and course materials nested in the same space. This was not carried on into Stage 3.

If you are starting to design a new research library, the first step is to re-think the relationships in the existing human/knowledge network (that's us vs them). We did that with all three stages of the library at the University of Queensland Ipswich Campus.

The earliest of briefs for the library, at Stage 1, was for a room with a lot of computers and good access to databases. The courses being taught there were contemporary, leading edge...modern! But what we found is that most Australian material is still paper-based. Also, our students were studying popular culture.

People started using the library as a social centre.

We observed the following:

-- they worked in groups around the PCs.
-- they wanted spaces where we could teach them things.
-- they spoke to us a lot when we were walking beyond the help desk.
-- some of them sat for eight hours a day at the same computer – and they did it regularly.
-- they wanted us to be able to help them find a book, or get the PC working.
-- some people never wanted to contact a librarian at all.
-- they wanted noise and open space.
-- they wanted enclosed silence.
-- they wanted to work with a book and a PC, or a book and a PC and their course readings.
-- they wanted to practice Powerpoint presentations.
-- they wanted to use a whiteboard.

Stage 3 has nineteen different kinds of learning spaces, from a small individual room with a PC to a bench with cushions beside a garden.

Sometimes our library users create those spaces themselves. The Library at Australian Catholic University Banyo is a straightforward design – books on the bottom, computers and library staff in the middle and the rest of the print collection at the top. The users created their own spaces. The carrels on the ground floor are all for quiet study; the Information Commons on level B is noisy. On Level C the carrels near the serials are quiet, the carrels and tables near the Curriculum Collection are noisy and the Information Commons Annex (Training Room) at the top is quiet. The students, with the help of the physical environment, created their own library spaces even before the signage was planned. There is a space for everyone. The environment not only shapes the space but encourages respect for it.

Space is money, and while at the first stage of the online explosion librarians could be happy that rows of shelves were being freed up by the development of online resources, now that space and more is being used in other ways.

As we increase our teaching role, most new education libraries include space for 'teaching PCs' – either in a cluster or in dedicated separate rooms. The changes in pedagogy – from single learner to peer learning in pairs or in groups – affect our planning. The most effective library Information Commons areas enable students to work alone in a semi-private space or to work in

mobile groups in the same space, coming together to discuss then drawing apart to record. This is on top of the need for group study rooms. At Ipswich we added another dimension, with café-style booths allowing two to four students to work around a PC in a limited space. The solitary reader still has needs. If your 'big' space is noisy and busy the solitary reader will start using a group study room for privacy.

Why are the big spaces so noisy? Why encourage them? We return to the idea of the library as a community space. As cities become more crowded we are more willing – we are encouraged– to be more "close". If you watched "My Restaurant Rules" or even if you eat out a little, you realize that the idea of dining at a refectory-style bench with a group of strangers is becoming the norm. At universities, the library is one of the few semi-structured places for students to meet. A student might complete a degree in accounting or arts and not meet a familiar face as classes change each semester. Many of our newer libraries are being designed with meeting spaces – big tables, low partitions, gathering places, ottomans, cushions or coffee shops. The computer spaces can also be designed to contribute to the library's position as a social space. Flexible computer spaces encourage collaboration and support between students. In a more open environment, students can offer cross-disciplinary support. Where the space enables them to, they are more likely to ask each other "Do you know anything about…?" At a purely functional level, this reduces work for library support staff, but it also encourages the kind of independent learning which will carry our students beyond university.

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The big tables become places to meet because of our propensity to "nest". We see it on buses or in church. Students tend to sit in the same area whenever they visit the library. To some extent, personality dictates that extroverts (e.g. teachers) will gravitate to noisy places, theology students will select quiet places and nurses will sit where they can work together.

In designing a library we can manipulate those spaces *without signage*. Soft lighting encourages

quiet. Lighting can also draw attention to a feature such as Reference or Help Desk. Carpeting can delineate areas. Different carpet prints and colours might create a gathering area, mark a low-traffic area, draw visitors along a path or make them stop. A combination of carpet, lighting and even the shape of a ceiling builds movement patterns.

Hamilton Wilson, who designed Stage 3 of UQ Ipswich used to say you should be able to "read" a building on entry and decide what you want to do. So, firstly something needs to stop you as you

If you wouldn't do it at home, why do it where you spend most of your waking life?

enter. Carlton College Minnesota was designed in 1956 and one of the design principles stated "on entering the door, the Reader Service area should be in clear view". (Metz, 1987) In the Library=Space scenario, this is valid, but do we need such Reader Service in the online world? Can we afford to make a permanently staffed desk the first port of call in facilitating independent discovery? If the desk is staffed by a librarian is it not a waste of our resources to have them answer questions like "where's the water fountain"? The design should ensure that our visitors self-serve first and only visit the desk when that fails. The purpose of the desk should determine its position and consequential issues such as staffing levels, positioning of power and data points, location of a telephone, number of service staff, storage space and the positioning of the security gate.

I think the library desk creates one of the most negative images of libraries, as so many of our desks look more like judicial benches than service centres.
Some points to consider regarding library desks:
-- Do we want the user to be taller than us (we sit)
-- Bending toward each other (low desk)
-- Or both be separated (by a high desk)
-- Lean together (high narrow desk)
-- Have users behind us (central desk)
Do we want Circulation and Reference at the same desk – with the same staff? If not, how to distinguish? How do we deal with people in wheelchairs, or who are not tall? Or with staff who are particularly tall? Do we want to be able to sit down and have a long transaction – or discourage

questioners by forcing them to stand? Will your staff stand up to serve a customer? Will they move out from behind the desk – should they? (In which case, make it easy.) Do library staff want to be lined up behind a long straight bench – or out in the middle of it all, alone?

Whatever, the desk must be high enough, low enough, wide enough, narrow enough. The desk needs to have storage underneath, to be scratch-proof, non-reflective, with no sharp corners. But in the end, no matter what the design, someone will be unhappy!

Most architects know nothing about libraries, let alone library design and indeed, nor do most of the people who run the finance, facilities and administrative sections of organisations. When there is an opportunity to have a new library, we librarians need to remember that we have professional skills and knowledge to bring to the discussion, and that most of the people who are working on the new library project rarely even visit a library. Ask them. Good libraries are designed by collaboration between responsive architects and forward-thinking librarians.

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There are many important practical issues to consider. You can never, ever have too many power and data points – and these need to be incorporated in every stage of the brief, as they determine the positioning of furniture and affect potential growth. Every time a new plan arrives – re-count the power and data points.

You will always need more storage space. Even if your day and evening staff are not on site at the same time, they will need separate desks. Passageways need to be wide enough for a wheelchair, and perhaps consider having the shelving a bit lower. At Ipswich Stage 3 we cut the shelving down. Not only people in wheelchairs, but anyone under five foot tall has problems with high shelves – both in reaching the books but also pulling books on top of themselves. End panels turn metal shelves into furniture and the effect far outweighs the cost involved. Signage should be explicit, clear and sparse. Many industries use colour-coded signage to distinguish the activities to take place in a particular service-point. Your library will need an area for displays, a place for collating, a conveniently located return box and processing

area. People like maps to position themselves. If you are having a tearoom, its placement is important. Firstly, tearooms are noisy if you have more then three staff together. If you want the staff to be able to escape the Desk, the tearoom should be positioned well away from any service areas. If however, you are short-staffed, you may

We return to the idea of library as a community space

be happy for staff to interrupt their breaks to work with customers, in which case your tearoom should be positioned close to the desk. Again, the ethos of your library affects every aspect of design.

Walls don't need to be beige. In Stage 1 at Ipswich we had walls that were jacaranda blue, maroon, pumpkin, deep blue. We and our customers loved it. It had life, it was different. The colours the architects chose were not especially fashionable for the time, but they carried energy into what might have been a dull building. (Many of the offices were slightly remodeled cubicles from the years when the heritage-listed site was a benevolent asylum) A tin of carefully-selected coloured paint can turn a place around. Similarly, why buy furniture only from a library supplier? Ash is not the only timber in the world. We can make our libraries more interesting by choosing furniture from church or office suppliers.
If you have the privilege of a redesign or a repaint, a little extra effort pays dividends.

As for mess, if you wouldn't do it at home, why do it where you spend most of your waking life? Multicoloured bookends belong in a kindergarten not a research facility. Store stuff in the backroom, not the public area. Recycling is great, but ugly. It costs very little to go to an office supermarket (wait for a sale) and buy plastic crates instead of using cardboard cartons.

Have as few instructional signs as possible. Those you do have should be in a consistent style and font, and laminated. I prefer to put my signs in Perspex photo frames, rather than blu-tacked on a wall. Never, ever use hand-written signs unless you have a noticeboard you use for that purpose. Keep public notices on noticeboards so they are not confused with library signs. Never put signs up with sticky tape. Don't use coloured paper.

If libraries are to be respected, and librarians

regarded as professionals we need to ensure we are creating and working in a professional environment. If your library looks professional your users are less likely to behave like children in it. It is all about psychology. Look at how a five year old behaves in a hushed, slightly darkened room. In running a library we are creating an environment. Do we want to create a primary school classroom? McDonalds? A nice café? A truck stop or an a la carte restaurant? The environment we create determines how the library is used and how it is cared for. I don't buy into the traditional image of a library drowning in bits of paper and populated by batty people who take no pride in their presentation. This is 2004 not 1950. We are operating in a sophisticated, competitive marketplace. If you can't have a cent for a new library, create a better space for yourself and your users by cleaning up and professionalising your old space. Rethink and replan what you already have.

We have gone past the days of designing a building for the stuff we are going to fill it with. Our new libraries are about creating places for the variety of people who use our resources and for our staff, creating flexible spaces that are familiar and comfortable but that will marry the heritage of the library with whatever's going to happen next. And that is anyone's guess.

Beth Crawter

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