



Towards An Architecture of Belonging

By Cindy Derrenbacher

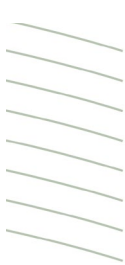
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As is well documented, theological education is under considerable stress. This stress is largely attributed to dwindling enrolments and the corresponding financial fallout, and more students choosing to study at-a-distance, in isolation, rather than choosing to be spiritually formed within community. These stresses are compounded in our libraries by the current reality of faculty creating assignments that do not necessarily lend themselves to rigorous, independent research and which may circumvent the library altogether, and to a cultural move from reading texts to reading digital short bites.

Taken as a whole, the state of theological education and its libraries is one where students are less connected to libraries as places of research, intellectual discovery, and academic community. This paper will advance several ideas for disrupting this trend working through various examples at the Dalton McCaughey Library (DML) in Parkville, Victoria, and towards an architecture of belonging.

During the pandemic I came across Syrian Architect Marwa al-Sabouni's autobiography, *The Battle for Home*,¹ where she argues that in the aftermath of the Syrian civil war, architectural and

¹ Marwa al-Sabouni, *Battle for Home* (London, UK: Thames & Hudson, 2017).



urban redevelopment plans impacted the peace and harmony of city dwellers in positive and negative ways. The author subsequently published *Building for Hope: Towards an Architecture of Belonging*,² where she reflects on how personal and communal spaces can influence one's sense of well-being and belonging. I have borrowed the subtitle of al-Sabouni's second work for the title of this presentation.

This year I had occasion to read Willie Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*.³ Jennings is a Black American and a Yale Divinity School professor who recounts his experience navigating predominantly white, male, Western-oriented theological schools and who challenges the colonial norms embedded in theological education. He was a visiting scholar at Trinity College Theological School here in Melbourne, in 2022.

Like Jennings, I contend that most people long to belong, to have connections beyond themselves, to fully participate in the life of a community. In reading these diverse and compelling books, I *wondered* if some of the truths found within their pages could be applied to our theological libraries, especially as the library landscape seems changed since the pandemic.

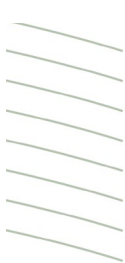
Some of what I wondered was, can we reconstruct community and a community of readers in and through our libraries? What is our vision for rebuilding? I thought it would be interesting to construct an argument for the library being a place of belonging, engaging with the five chapters of al-Sabouni's book, *Building for Hope*. The author describes five fears that bear on rebuilding efforts and some potential remedies for consideration.

Self-Preservation And Continuity

In her first chapter, "The Fear of Death: Attaining Continuity," al-Sabouni writes about humanity's natural instinct for self-preservation. Similarly, as librarians, we seek to preserve the voices of the past, the great cloud of witnesses (the Church Fathers and Mothers, for example),

² Marwa al-Sabouni, *Building for Hope: Towards an Architecture of Belonging* (London, UK: Thames and Hudson, 2021).

³ Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: an Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020).



while at the same time, introducing readers to new and emerging voices. For example, this past year, the DML added voices from the majority world through Langham Publishing whose tagline is “Majority world theology for the global glory of God.”

As professionals we create spaces in our libraries that are conducive to quiet study and research; spaces that are worth lingering in; peaceful, meditative, and perhaps *greened*; sanctuaries in the midst of the bustle of the city; places where one can think, reflect, and retreat from the noise of the Internet and social media. Our ordered libraries with classification schemes and everything “returned to its rightful spot” may be in contrast to cluttered homes, the sometimes chaotic spaces in which we dwell.

al-Sabouni decries humanity’s detachment from place, from land and houses, unable to define what *home* really is—a place of belonging.⁴ She wonders why humanity is “so ambivalent about settling down?”⁵ She writes of “mass production followed by robotization[,] saturating the building market.”⁶ Likewise, in our libraries, I wonder if the proliferation of information, and with the advent of AI, that there are just too many voices and ideas and information outlets to sift through and evaluate and that library users “sense the limits of [their] capability to engage with it”⁷ all, overwhelmed and detached from the subject matter for the sake of self-preservation.

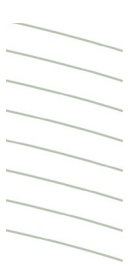
Given this proliferation of information but the practicalities of diminishing resources and purchasing power, as professionals we have no time to stand by, *nostalgic for the ways things once were*. And neither do our students, by all accounts. This semester I have been approached on more than one occasion by a keen student who rushes in just before class hoping to find resources on various subjects but then spares no time to thoughtfully work through the OPAC results. She alerts

⁴ al-Sabouni, *Building for Hope*, 20-21.

⁵ al-Sabouni, *Building for Hope*, 21.

⁶ al-Sabouni, *Building for Hope*, 22.

⁷ al-Sabouni, *Building for Hope*, 24.



me that she will be back to pick up key materials during the class break that in the end *I have curated*, mirroring al-Sabouni when she writes: “the least amount of effort for the most amount of gain.”⁸

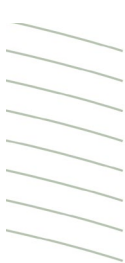
I note behaviour patterns in the library. Our theologs tend to use the DML’s carrells, studying alone, in isolation, whereas during the exam period, University of Melbourne students often gather at group tables, though studying individually—safety and mutual support in numbers!

And safety is key for self-preservation. Since working at the DML I have felt a certain sense of pride that our library has an ecumenical history (comprised of the Uniting Church of Victoria and Tasmania, the Australian Jesuits, and the Anglican Ecclesiastical Province of Victoria) and serves as a witness to unity in diversity, inclusion, equity, fairness, and togetherness. That said, in recent months I was asked to serve as a fire warden for the library and the training included responding to bomb threats and the lockdown procedures for life-threatening events. Our (semi-)public spaces are no longer regarded as safe, stable, and enduring.

Given the DML’s leafy laneway location, we have found ourselves surprisingly vulnerable. As but one example, the Centre for Theology and Ministry facility—the facility in which the library resides—inadvertently harboured a homeless man overnight for several weeks during Autumn and this same man regularly patronized the library during daytime hours for five months, challenging the library staff’s and the Uniting Church’s understanding of home, what it means to belong, the ethics of inclusion, and the right to feel safe: self-preservation.

While al-Sabouni writes on humanity’s instinct for *self*-preservation, we, as librarians, work towards preservation of rare books and unique materials that speak to our histories, culture, and the varied church traditions we serve. To that end, in 2025, the DML plans to move its rare book materials from the basement stacks to an environmentally controlled rare books storage area on the main floor of the library. This will enable improved access to the rare books, as well as new exhibition, teaching, and learning opportunities. By better preserving our rare books, we facilitate

⁸ al-Sabouni, *Building for Hope*, 57.



a sense of continuity between the past and the present, invoking memories, connections, “comparisons,”⁹ and ideas, that will hopefully, positively, bear on the future.

Finally, al-Sabouni explores the ideas of character, dignity, and continuity in architecture, and which, I believe, find application in our libraries. She writes: “Character has order and continuity, and it soothes some of our inner fears by creating and fulfilling expectations.”¹⁰ So too, our libraries are ordered and provide a sense of continuity, generally meeting users’ expectations. Al-Sabouni writes of “dignity in the sense of maintaining a state of uprightness and resilience, resisting the pressure to collapse...”¹¹ Likewise, libraries have been remarkably resilient in the face of change and budgetary pressures. And on the whole, *librarians* are resilient, creative, and collaborative in nature, and ANZTLA and other associations like Atla, are tonic for the profession. But, is this enough for our continuation? al-Sabouni writes: “To extract life from death, abundance from need, a formula must be found.”¹²

Need And Generosity

In Chapter 2, entitled “The Fear of Need: the Search for Abundance,” al-Sabouni writes: “A sense of security is a cornerstone of our sense of home. Our homes, in addition to being cradles for our memories, our sense of continuity and our accomplishments, must be places where we feel safe—and once we feel secure about our immediate survival, it is the fear of need that takes centre stage.”¹³ She continues: “Just as continuity counteracts impermanence, abundance counteracts need.”¹⁴

While seemingly counterintuitive, there is a certain ampleness and nimbleness associated with a well-weeded library collection that reflects the view of architect Mies van der Rohe who is thought

⁹ al-Sabouni, *Building for Hope*, 40.

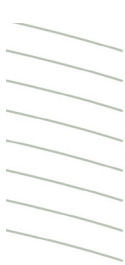
¹⁰ al-Sabouni, *Building for Hope*, 41.

¹¹ al-Sabouni, *Building for Hope*, 41.

¹² al-Sabouni, *Building for Hope*, 49.

¹³ al-Sabouni, *Building for Hope*, 51.

¹⁴ al-Sabouni, *Building for Hope*, 51.



to have coined the phrase, “Less is more.”¹⁵ A pared-down collection actually assists in highlighting the remaining texts. And, as this conference progresses, we will hear more about right-sizing efforts from our colleagues.

Further, I would resist the approach of keeping the last copy of a resource for “so-called” research purposes, especially if it is no longer deemed useful. The *quality* of our abundant information resources is key. We need not be curators of out-dated collections. Rather, our libraries must be lively centres of information that draw users in (whether physically or virtually), showcasing materials in various formats and in relevant ways, increasing satisfaction and making “...room for the imagination...”¹⁶

I have been impressed with the work of one of the DML’s library casuals, Andrew Hateley-Browne, who recently developed two interactive displays on the ground floor of the library, one connected with theology and food, the other, showcasing artistically drawn UCA churches from the northeast corner of Victoria. Andrew has created these displays with patron engagement in mind, eliciting generous responses. Take a look during morning tea tomorrow...

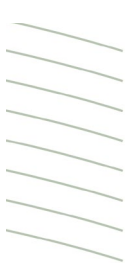
Author al-Sabouni writes: “A city becomes dead when it loses its dynamism, or, in urbanists’ terms, its ‘liveability.’ It enters a condition in which businesses dwindle, shops close down, products disappear, prices go up, wages go down—and its inhabitants begin to abandon it, as though jumping from a sinking ship.”¹⁷ When I visit the State Library, which some of you will tour tomorrow, I have often wondered how I might capture the dynamic atmosphere of this library, replicating it at the DML.

When I started working at the library last year, I learned that private (i.e., external) memberships were down. There was not enough perceived value for the cost of membership. While membership

¹⁵ ArchDaily Team, “Less is More: Mies van der Rohe, a Pioneer of the Modern Movement,” accessed January 20, 2025, <https://www.archdaily.com/350573/happy-127th-birthday-mies-van-der-rohe>.

¹⁶ al-Sabouni, *Building for Hope*, 54.

¹⁷ al-Sabouni, *Building for Hope*, 56.



fees have subsequently been lowered, this policy change may have come too little, too late. Alternatively, potential members may be less inclined to take out a membership as they are saturated with information—“suffocating abundance.”¹⁸ Or, perhaps it is time to mount a formal external membership campaign. I have included an example of a *free* membership campaign that we promoted at last year’s UCA VicTas Synod.

Just as al-Sabouni writes that “[n]o city can thrive in isolation; it needs connections with the surrounding urban centres and the economic flow of the market,”¹⁹ our libraries benefit from various networks whether they be ANZTLA, ALIA or Atla, our ILL networks, the DML’s affiliation with other libraries through the University of Divinity and the residential college libraries at the University of Melbourne. We are strength in numbers, gaining ideas and understanding of our profession and trends from one another, and this helps carry us forward, together.

Finally, the generosity of library volunteers at the DML has been overwhelming. We could not have accomplished the weekly reshelving, the clean-up and reorganization of our entire basement stacks, or the documentation of our print journal collection this year without them. It takes time to work with volunteers, but their generosity of spirit has made a lasting impression.

I would suggest that we have abundantly more than what initially meets the eye.

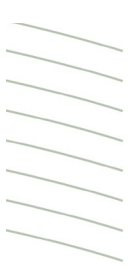
Betrayal

Chapter 3 “The Fear of Treachery: Finding the Exit” sounds rather ominous. al-Salbouni writes: “In our own search for abundance we are...challenged by the threat of treachery”²⁰ or the “betrayal

¹⁸ al-Sabouni, *Building for Hope*, 64.

¹⁹ al-Sabouni, *Building for Hope*, 65.

²⁰ al-Sabouni, *Building for Hope*, 91.



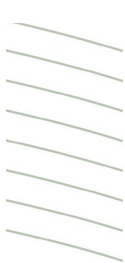
of trust.”²¹ She continues: “Before we can settle somewhere, we first need to identify threats and eliminate their sources.”²²

If you have worked in the library field for long, you may have felt a sense of betrayal on one or more occasions. The library, and the services it provides, may have been overlooked or forgotten or not regarded as highly as one might hope by administrators, faculty, and colleagues. Likewise, when purchasing materials, you may have felt betrayed by the publishing industry, given the rising costs. You may also have been disheartened by patrons who have felt entitled to tell you what you should have in your library or what you should dispense of, unaware of your well-crafted collection policy. I found it telling that at the 2023 Atla Annual in Ft. Worth, TX, the keynote speaker, Emily Drabinski, the incoming president of the American Library Association (ALA), presented a talk entitled, “Save the Library, Save the World,” where she signalled her dismay at the rise of book banning in the States. She articulated a sense of being betrayed by the very community she seeks to serve.

In this chapter, the author examines the role of boundaries in architecture. Earlier on in this presentation, I wondered what contributes to the State Library’s sense of dynamism in the CBD? I would suggest that the foot traffic is somewhat free flowing, there are few obvious boundaries or limits, and there are multiple exits. It is, essentially, a porous building. The public can enter and exit from different sides. The front entrance spills down the sloping lawn and is a place where musicians and lunch eaters and protesters gather; it is a coming-together-place, a civic hub in the city. There is a fluidity there that the DML will never enjoy. With a single entrance and exit, DML staff can generally observe the flow of traffic, but patrons may feel a certain sense of unease (shades of treachery), that by entering they are slightly *caught* in our ways of doing things, our more unique Pettee system of organization, our code of conduct that allows for water bottles but no food or other drinks despite the proximity and casual vibes of the Sage + Grace Café.

²¹ al-Sabouni, *Building for Hope*, 91.

²² al-Sabouni, *Building for Hope*, 91. Note that al-Sabouni is equating settlement, here, with our quest for home.



In our profession, our collection development policies, membership policies, codes of conduct, serve as necessary boundaries. When boundaries are crossed tension or conflict arises.

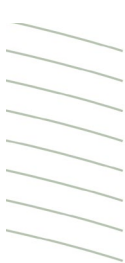
Twice a year, for three weeks at a time, our primary users, our theologists, feel a nuanced sense of betrayal as University of Melbourne students flood our library space using the desks and carrels during SWOTVAC and the exam period, sometimes crossing boundaries in unwanted ways. The quiet sanctuary of the library can be overwhelmed by these so-called, “uninvited guests,” sometimes literal waves of students, most of whom “do not belong” nor do they necessarily want to conform to our ways of being and doing. One day, several weeks ago, our library counter tracked over 345 comings and goings. As a staff, we actively seek to be inclusive and generous with our space, but also sensitive to our primary users. This inevitably creates a certain tension.

Loneliness

In Chapter 4: “The Fear of Loneliness: Achieving Acceptance,” al-Sabouni references the epidemic of loneliness, and I do not think that our primary library users, those *in* the church or formed within community *for* the church, are immune. This raises two questions in my mind:

- Question 1) Do our encounters with patrons, our library programs on offer, and our library services ward off loneliness?

While library customer service should be a priority, there is a sense in which we, as library professionals, sometimes loathe these interactions, the interruptions—finding out, for example, that a print copy of a book is showing as available when, in fact, it is missing from the shelf—or that a patron had a higher expectation for a quick response than what we delivered. We may feel that our work-lives are poured out, emptied, and yet, that is not enough. I suspect that at the DML, our in-person, online, and phone interactions could be infused with greater grace and acceptance.



Truthfully, I am less fearful of loneliness than I am of the decline of a book-loving culture. Intriguingly, Christians have long identified themselves as a “People of the Book,” but as librarians, we no longer expect our patrons to be well-read or to sustain any kind of reading practice.

In his book, *In Bed with the Word*,²³ Daniel Coleman writes that “[w]e live in the midst of a transition from print culture to screen culture”²⁴ and in light of this shift, “[r]eading is counter-cultural mainly because it requires quiet time, being slow and meditative, and it is active rather than passive, being imaginative and dialogical. These qualities run in the opposite direction from the one in which Western commodity culture is heading.”²⁵

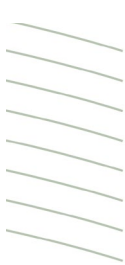
Coleman’s assessment is grim; the DML has taken small steps to counter this wane in reading. This year we hosted two community reading events, (which, frankly, were not terribly well-subscribed given staff preparation and promotions). For one event, my colleague Carlos and I discussed and drew connections between Tish Harrison Warren’s *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life* and Cal Newport’s *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World*. For the other event, we hosted a moderated discussion on the latest *Quarterly Essay* regarding the US election. These events are intended to encourage patrons to read, especially beyond required reading lists, and to join in discussion with others, in community.

The DML also holds periodic writing retreats, in part, because there is a strong correlation between reading and writing, and the writing practice can be a lonely endeavour. These one-day retreats are intended to encourage researchers and writers to persist in their writing, motivated by a community of writers, both academic and general. We normally take a brief break to listen to an author speak about their writing life. These free retreats have been well-received and attended.

²³ Daniel Coleman, *In Bed with the Word: Reading, Spirituality, and Cultural Politics* (Edmonton, AB: The University of Alberta Press, 2009).

²⁴ Coleman, *In Bed with the Word*, 18.

²⁵ Coleman, *In Bed with the Word*, 26.



Many libraries have recently adopted FLEX, an online content platform that claims to “make it easier for... librarians...and educators to compile and share copyright-compliant course material with their students.”²⁶ FLEX is a useful tool, tracking Copyright, providing ease of information access for faculty and students, as well as relevant materials already uploaded to the system. That said, it appears to come at a cost. Library staff and student interactions are eliminated, the satisfaction of serendipitously finding useful resources is lost, as is original context. As my colleague, Carlos, recently commented, “FLEX creates a new virtual library, but at the same time, frees faculty and students of the library.”²⁷ The Principle of Least Effort is entrenched, as is the loss of relationship.

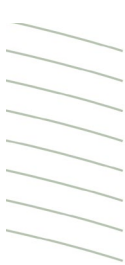
- Question 2 As we get to know our patrons can we find ways to creatively partner with them in our libraries?

Library Casual Natalie Senior, here with us today, has, in the last month, surveyed our faculty, students, and external members to learn how we might more effectively engage them in relation to information and media. As she analyses the results of the survey and the focus groups that she has convened, we hope to develop a more robust media strategy moving forward, increasingly connecting with our clientele.

We are also currently showcasing a small selection of contemporary postmodern religious artworks by a library patron, having paired relevant books with each facsimile artwork. This is not an ideal art display, (the *actual works* would be an improvement, of course), but it is a contribution *initiated* by the patron that we value. It has been a way of offering friendship and a sense of belonging to our library community.

²⁶ “Flex for Librarians,” Flex—Copyright Agency, accessed November 14, 2024, at [Flex.copyright.com.au/login](https://flex.copyright.com.au/login).

²⁷ In conversation with Carlos Lopez, Associate Librarian at the Dalton McCaughey Library, November 14, 2024.



Boredom

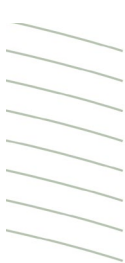
In Chapter 5, “The Fear of Boredom: the Kaleidoscope of Meaning,” al-Sabouni summarizes German philosopher Martin Heidegger’s understanding of boredom. She writes that “[Heidegger’s] analysis is that we are born with this concern to find answers to the existential questions: what really matters? What makes a difference? What is meaningful? We can’t bear the thought that we have passed through life leaving no mark, that our existence and our non-existence would have been, for the world in which we live, one and the same.”²⁸

And so, it is worth asking once more, what are we building and for what end in our libraries? Are we simply caretakers of expensive real estate and conduits of information? With so many published works, do the materials (and the voices therein) that we have curated over time make a difference, especially if reading is on the decline? Are our libraries, physical and virtual, compelling places and spaces where patrons choose to linger, research, read, and write?

One trend I am watching (and which supports meaning-making) is that many academic libraries are taking pains to decolonize their collections. This work is challenging, from identifying knowledge keepers to lead the effort, and in terms of cataloguing—creating new, representative subject headings, to de-selecting materials appropriately and sensitively. And, recently at the DML, in response to an influx of Pacific Island theologists, we are in the initial stages of expanding our Pasifika collection and creating a culturally appropriate space for teaching, learning, and reading in the library.

Finally, as inferred, we must build faculty relations, so that as instructors create assignments, the library is integrated in a meaningful way. If faculty or library staff simply upload reading assignments to the local learning management system, the library and the librarian-student relationship, as well as the satisfaction of searching and finding and learning on one’s own, are circumvented. Faculty members must advocate for the library and its specialized resources, to

²⁸ al-Sabouni, *Building for Hope*, 173.



create assignments that require independent research, otherwise, we have less scope for creating a culture of reading and belonging. Just as there is a rhythm in some of our schools of morning and evening prayer, we need to encourage a rhythm of regularly accessing the library, both physically and virtually. In this half-hour, I have shared some of our attempts at working towards an architecture of belonging and I hope to learn your strategies as well.

Conclusion

And so, to conclude, as theological librarians, we *labour* to construct a dynamic place and space for patrons to belong. We welcome patrons with the belief that the written word can be formative, that reading can spark the Christian imagination, calling all of us to a wider experience and a broader understanding of what it means to be human and of our place and purpose in our communities and the world at large.

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