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and Organisations:
Opportunities or
Constraints?

Sarah E. Thomas

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LIBRARY ENVIRONMENTS AND ORGANISATIONS: OPPORTUNITIES OR CONSTRAINTS?

The following article is based on a presentation by Sarah E. Thomas, a librarian at Cornell University in the United States. She spoke at an international seminar on universities and libraries organised by the OECD Programme on Institutional Management in Higher Education (IMHE) in August, 2002. This abridged version begins by summarising how libraries thrive in an era of change. Next it explores storing print publications and how libraries are increasing space for services and activities. The paper then addresses new roles and partners for libraries and, finally, architectural solutions to spatial constraints.

Libraries thrive in an era of change

Library environments and organisations are in a heightened state of change. Far from becoming deserted or anachronistic in the digital age, libraries are enjoying a renaissance which manifests itself in the widespread renovation and reconceptualisation of library facilities. Modern libraries or historic buildings that are rejuvenated to reflect contemporary functionality are experiencing immense popularity as destination spots. The challenge of book storage of collections that seem to grow inexorably offers opportunities to rethink the very nature of a library. Is it necessary to own a title? Is it necessary to make it available for immediate consultation and browsing? Responding to the pressure placed on buildings has resulted in an array of creative solutions and services that alters the relationship of libraries to each other and of patrons to collections. A trend to return library space to users is occurring, with collections and staff being moved off site and new user space being created out of unused terrain. Successful facilities are likely to accommodate boundary spanning in organisations or to house multiple units that engage in collaborative support for teaching and learning. Because the institutions are so much in flux, library facilities are being designed to be flexible, capable of further reconfiguration as the structure of organisations shifts and new needs emerge. At the beginning of the 21st century, the public venerates the traditional role of libraries as custodians of knowledge and culture, and they celebrate

the iconographic character of grand reading rooms. They seek out libraries for the community space they provide at the social and intellectual crossroads of society. To integrate into the digital information age, they require that the library incorporate state-of-the-art information technology and services which bridge the analogue and digital worlds.

Storing printed publications

With publication of books and print journals continuing unabated and the appetite for acquisitions unsated, libraries reached saturation. Yet where these volumes had been the source of pride for universities, they were now a source of vexation. The growth of holdings and the space they required collided with other interests of the university, which have been constructing other facilities such as laboratories, classrooms and residences to accommodate expanding populations and research priorities. University administrators have been reluctant to commit to the expense of central campus expansions, and as campuses became congested, they tried to preserve the green spaces so highly prized in their micro metropolises. Out of these conflicts was born the high-density storage facility. In the United States the Harvard Depository, erected in 1986, has become a model for many other remote storage buildings.

The off-site storage library, with its highly efficient shelving of materials organised by size and depending on delivery mechanisms of daily van service or scanning of items, has recently entered a new phase. As more and more of these “big boxes” have been constructed, at a fraction of the cost of on-site storage, they have forced reconsideration of this approach. At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), for example, campus space constraints have resulted in over 75% of MIT’s library collections being housed off site; the librarians are warning that this imbalance of access is putting its readers at a disadvantage. They are laying the groundwork for the construction of a USD 100 million science library and a USD 50 million renovation of an existing library, enabling them to support browsing and direct access to a much higher percentage of their collection. Librarians are beginning to assess the proportion of their collections that must be available to users for on-site consultation. On one hand, MIT asserts convincingly that 25% is an insufficient number. Elsewhere librarians are challenging the assumption that a significant proportion of their holdings must remain in central stacks. Harvard’s Widener Library, the great treasure house supporting the distinguished faculty and students of the College of Arts and Sciences, now sends

68% of its newly acquired publications directly to the Depository, and they estimate that within the decade more than 60% of Widener's holdings will be located off-site. At Ohio State University, where the library is conducting a campaign for a USD 100 million renovation of its main building, the planners propose reducing the amount of space devoted to shelving.

Informing these decisions are several factors. Automated circulation systems have enabled libraries to determine that substantial parts of their collections never circulate. As publishers and entities such as JSTOR digitise retrospective holdings of journals, patrons rely more on electronic access, making it reasonable to transfer paper volumes to remote storage. Universities seeking the most

cost-effective means to store items often collaborate to reduce overhead. First gradually, and now with increasing rapidity and frequency, librarians are questioning the need to duplicate titles held in these repositories. There is a movement toward establishing a library of record for maintaining access to and preserving paper copies, freeing other institutions to deaccess their holdings. The consequences are lower capital and operational costs, institutional interdependence and a greater ability to hold central libraries to zero collections growth. Other benefits of remote storage are environmentally superior conditions and protection against thieves.

Increasing space for services and activities

Over the past 15 years libraries have shifted from an emphasis on ownership to access, and there is increased focus on services. Certain traditional staples of the library have altered their shape. The card catalogue, once the starting point for scholars seeking entry into the library's collections, receded in importance as libraries brought its contents online, and as users began to prefer the Web as the point of departure for discovery. Similarly, as libraries provided access to more electronic journals, the periodicals room declined in popularity. Reference transactions have also fallen steadily, perhaps a casualty of the greater independence of information seekers who conduct much of their information seeking online. As a consequence of these changes, libraries are reconceptualising their space in innovative ways. The vast amounts of floor space freed up by removal of the catalogue now are often occupied by computer workstations. Libraries have converted periodical rooms into cafés or group study rooms. Taking into account the trend toward one-stop shopping and the blurring of the boundary between reference and information, libraries are unifying service points. For example, they may combine access to materials formerly separated by format, creating a single service desk for inquiries for newspapers, microfilms and general reference. The complexity of information resources makes navigation for readers much more difficult than in the days of the book-dominated culture. Thus libraries have greatly increased the amount of instruction, adding wired classrooms to their domain. As general collections have grown more homogeneous, owing to online aggregations of serials or to restricted budgets which force libraries to cut back on acquisition of monographs, special collections have ascended in prominence. There is greater attention to primary source materials as students begin research earlier in their careers, and as samples mounted on the Internet whet the appetite for access to originals and entire collections.

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Cornell's Periodicals Room was hardly used by 2001.

Transformed into a wired café, the space is now one of the campus' most popular study and meeting places.



© The Cornell University Library

One of the major challenges facing libraries and their users is the integration of print and digital and place and space. Not only do library patrons need access to dispersed manifestations of knowledge in a variety of locations and formats, but also they themselves are now creating new knowledge through the incorporation of diverse sources. Increasingly they seek modes of expression that are multidimensional and for which they employ computers, software and the raw material of library holdings.

No longer is the monastic study carrel with its narrow ledge and bookshelf sufficient for the thesis writer. Now she desires a small enclosed room with electrical outlets and Internet connections for her laptop. The comfort and convenience of home need to be reproduced in the library, with soft chairs, warm lighting and an inviting atmosphere encouraging learning and research. Users need quiet zones where they can concentrate, interactive areas where they can work with one another utilising the latest technology, connections to online services and live experts, and space for social intercourse and community building.

The demand for technology support has led to the development of areas called media commons, requiring a reorientation of space to accommodate the multiple spatial requirements of users who need computers, colour plotters and printers, GIS programs, scanners, projectors and a host of other technological devices not envisioned by the creators of the codex. Because the new order combines traditional and new technologies, libraries must allocate even more space for users.

Although headlines in newspapers often suggest that Internet traffic has supplanted the physical library, the fact is that at research libraries, visits remain steady or are even on the rise. The library, far from being a mere warehouse for books checked out by clerks, is a critical component of social and intellectual fabric of the university. The inspirational reading rooms of the 19th and 20th centuries still exert a powerful pull on readers. The University of Washington has just celebrated the restoration of its magnificent Gothic reading room, and Columbia, Yale and Harvard have all invested significantly in maintaining the tradition of the reading and reference room, albeit in an updated form with access to power and data.

Access to physical collections is one reason to use the library, but equally important is the need for discourse and discovery with others engaged in academic pursuits. Cyber cafés, imported from progressive bookstores, have taken off like wildfire in U.S. libraries, taking advantage of relaxed prohibitions on mixing books and food, and drawing on the pleasure of human interaction in an ever-more technological world. Libraries have expanded their role in curating exhibitions, sponsoring lectures and planning other activities that attract people celebrating the life of the mind. Correspondingly, libraries are expanding the amount of space dedicated to these activities, and they are extending their hours. Most university libraries offer 24-hour access to at least a portion of their reading rooms and services during the academic year.



© Photo by Peter Aaron/ESTO

Renovation of Butler Library Main Reference Hall,
Columbia University, New York,
New York



Alderman Café, University of Virginia Library



New roles and partners for libraries

In the past several years libraries have taken on new roles and partners in order to serve their public's needs and to meet their expectations. Both the library's physical environment and the library organisation have changed as a result. The need for ubiquitous technology and deep technological expertise and the rising number of electronic resources have led to the collocation of information technology and library staff in neighbouring service points, team teaching and, in some cases, the merger of units. At Dartmouth College, for example, architects planned a new library addition that places information technology specialists and librarians in adjacent offices and public service desks. At the University of Georgia, construction of that campus' largest and most expensive building, the Georgia Student Learning Centre, is underway, with the library director at the helm of the planning group that has recommended a spacious building combining group study rooms, electronic classrooms and a traditional reading room. The building will be 200 000 square feet (18 600 m²), housing an electronic teaching library with 500 network stations, 2 200 seats, many electronic classrooms, plus the ubiquitous coffee house and lounge chairs for students. At Northwestern University, in Chicago, Illinois, there is a library building called "2 East", which is a version of media commons. In it the university has located collection managers, digital

media services and academic technologies. Although organisationally separate, the university library and academic information technology support work together to offer their clients a library training facility, a reference classroom and digitisation services where they can assist faculty in creating courses that employ digital content.

Sharing staff expertise often leads to integration or adjacent placing of staff and services. Expertise gained by librarians in the management of digital resources has made them key resources in other cultural units that are just developing digital activities or products. Thus librarians assume responsibility for museums or university presses, with the consequence that both facilities and staff can overlap. Cornell University manages the operations of the arXiv, a physics pre-print server, and directs Project Euclid, an online service for publishers of mathematics journals, with a concomitant increase in staff and space needed to house their operations. Some libraries partner with other academic units in teaching and research. At New York University, the dean of libraries oversees not only the libraries, but also the television station, media services and the New York University Press. The preparation for classes, meetings with other professionals and students, and laboratory space all place new demands on library facilities for different configurations. In addition to more square footage, the fluid and dynamic organisational changes create a need for space that is very flexible and easily altered.

The University of Georgia Student Learning Centre



Architectural solutions to spatial constraints

In their quest to accommodate the variety of dimensions of the library and its users, universities and architects have presented many ingenious solutions that respond to the constraints of space. In 2001 Princeton University announced that it would build a USD 60 million building designed by Frank Gehry, consolidating several science libraries. Smoothing the way for this momentous decision were several factors: a willing donor, the desire by researchers to liberate space for laboratories and the increasing availability of scientific information online. Another popular solution to limited on-campus space, as we have seen, is displacement. Most frequently, libraries move books off site to high-density storage facilities. Of late institutions are also shifting staff from central libraries to office space located at some distance from the library. When Harvard moved its cataloguing operations out of Widener Library to an office located a mile away in 2001, it transformed the former cataloguing workroom into an inviting current periodicals reading room. Many other institutions are re-examining the necessity of locating all staff near public spaces. One solution to total separation is to establish an area in a central location for "hoteling", where staff can reserve temporary offices and business services to use for a few hours or days.

Divestment is a more drastic form of dealing with overcrowding, but some libraries have chosen to contract out services such as cataloguing with the consequent savings in staff space. Cleverly, Yale, Harvard and the New York Public Library have created additional space within existing buildings by filling in light courts, fresh air intake courts and atria. These renovations have resulted in buildings within a building, and the transformation of previously wasted square footage into elegant public and staff space. At Cornell a prohibition on library buildings on central campus drove the library to expand underground. Emory filled in the space between the Woodruff and Candler libraries with a glass enclosure that houses its advanced technology and that creates a porous connection between the two.

Both physical facilities and the organisations which reside in them are still evolving. The transformation requires our imagination and flexibility. The evidence, as manifested in the construction and reconfiguration of the past few years, is that these qualities abound.

For further information, contact:

Sarah E. Thomas

Carl A. Kroch University Librarian

Cornell University, Ithaca, New York

Fax: 1 607 255 6788, e-mail: set9@cornell.edu

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