Guest Editorial

The Library as a Place

In a recent article, Paul Evan Peters posed the question "Is the library a place in the age of networks?"* I have recently been involved in the design process for two libraries, the first to serve the sciences, the second to provide services to the undergraduate and graduate colleges of Emory University. The latter facility has been dubbed the "library of the future," as it brings together traditional library functions and networked information services. The question posed by Peters is one that a great many librarians are either asking themselves or are being asked to respond to by college and university administrators, faculty, trustees, architects et al. Librarians would probably all like to answer with a resounding YES! Certainly as we deal with crowded conditions, asbestos abatement, retrofitting for technology, and ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) compliance, we realize how difficult and costly it is to work with existing library buildings.

Many of us have hesitated in our response to the question of the future of the library as a place because of the electronic revolution occurring in the instructional and research processes. If scholarship is up and running on the digital highway, will colleges and universities still need to invest in library facilities? I'm convinced that the answer to this question is an emphatic yes, and that the library will continue to be a place well into the foreseeable future. Over the next decade, the library as a place, and the services provided from it, may just be more central to the academic enterprise than at any time in the past. Indeed, that investment in the library infrastructure will be one of the best long-term investments an institution of higher learning can make in the coming years. Those institutions without appropriate library facilities may find themselves at a serious competitive disadvantage. Why? Because the academic library will be one of the principal on-ramps to the information highway. It will also be a place where important pieces of scholarship flowing on the highway will be created.

The integration of traditional library services and those that will support the emerging networked information services poses a real challenge for the design of library facilities. Discussed below are the types of space needed to support some of the emerging networked service environment. These services aren't crystal-ball activities dependent on the great seamless virtual information system hypothesized for the future. Libraries are decades, if not a generation or more, away from that reality. These activities are the kind of stuff that librarians are contemplating or are dealing with right now, and for the foreseeable future.

CONVERGENCE

Library use is increasing. Many colleagues indicate that services are being used at all-time high levels, in spite of cutbacks in funds for library collections and hours of service. This trend can be attributed primarily to the user's ability to identify more material through access to online catalogs, databases, CDs, and

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* Paul Evan Peters, "Is the Library a 'Place' in the Age of Networks?" *Educom Review* 29 (Jan./Feb. 1994): 62–63.

the Internet. The delight and the irony, of course, are that electronic access places the print resources in higher demand. From a space perspective print collections and electronic resources need to coexist for the foreseeable future.

Yet another point of convergence is the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of contemporary instruction and research. Any good service librarian has long recognized that much user behavior is unpredictable. Most users, except those with a high degree of library experience, just don't distinguish Reference from Circulation from Interlibrary Loan, etc. These are librarian distinctions. We have traditionally compensated for this phenomenon by having a well-trained service staff that can provide referrals to the appropriate point of service. Distributed access via the electronic highway gives this challenge a whole new level of complexity. User behavior becomes even more unpredictable. That development argues for integration of services and fewer service points. Fewer service points do not mean less service, but rather services that support the convergence of research while still supporting the specialist through consultation.

TRAINING AND INSTRUCTION

The ongoing explosion in networked information services is likely to continue at a rapidly accelerating pace. Navigating the ocean of print, electronic, and visual information is becoming more, not less, difficult. This development emphasizes a teaching and instructional role. Increasingly, the librarian is being viewed as a central element in developing student and faculty skills for coping with the rising tide of information.

Training facilities, almost an afterthought in library design, will be central to the mission of the library of the future. Libraries need instructional facilities that will support access to the full gamut of media and the full range of instructional methodology from small group to seminar.

KNOWLEDGE CREATION

One of the most exciting trends in academic libraries is the emerging role of knowledge creation. Traditionally, libraries have been repositories for information, and at best gateways to other depositories. A number of exciting projects are under way that place the librarian, and the information available through the library, into a partnership for the creation of knowledge services. These services bring together print, data, audio, and visual resources into software that can be used for instructional and research activities. Faculty, student, librarian, and computing specialist are collaborating to develop such services. Because much of the source material for these services resides in libraries, this trend will continue.

Because this service has not traditionally taken place in libraries, space to support these activities doesn't exist. These new service spaces will need to address the collaborative, team nature of these activities. Libraries will also need new processing space to support conversion of print to digital format.

What do these trends implicit in the evolving service environment mean for the library as a place? They mean that most of our library buildings ARE NOT designed to support the rapidly altering service model. The facilities that most librarians inhabit today were designed around print collections. In this model, user service areas are frequently appendages to processing areas and book stacks. In the emerging model this relationship is reversed, or at the very least brought into a more appropriate balance. As our print collections continue to expand, for the foreseeable future a substantial portion of the collection will be housed in some form of compact shelving and/or remote storage. New construction costs are simply too prohibitive to devote space exclusively to conventional open-stack configurations.

Libraries will need space for "traditional" library functions such as stacks and user seating, and more hybrid space that supports both the traditional and emerging service construct. New space will be primarily people space, not book stacks. The people space will be for services, but not just service desks. In the

library that has access, teaching, and knowledge creation at the heart of its mission, space will need to support and facilitate these activities. Flexibility, and the ability to adapt space to emerging and unanticipated service needs, will be the principal design requirement for future facilities. What type of library space will be needed is the real question.

In developing our facilities at Emory, librarians were on the cutting, if not bleeding, edge. There simply does not exist a documented body of knowledge relative to the design of the library of the future. Much of the knowledge accumulated over the past one hundred years regarding successful library design isn't applicable to the current situation. Perhaps the most revolutionary aspect of new library construction is not the facility itself, but the process needed to achieve the design. Traditionally, the process of library building design has largely been directed by the library staff in conjunction with an architectural team. Organizationally, the library of the future will be an amalgamation of various elements drawn from across the academic spectrum. The services provided in the library of the future will be undertaken by partnerships of scholars, librarians, and computing specialists. The design process must reflect this emerging organizational integration. This presents a real challenge to our planning efforts, but holds the promise for a more meaningful outcome, better suited to the networked environment.

Not long ago, a computing-center director colleague remarked how difficult it has been for computing operations to make the transition from a data-processing to a user-service operation. Computing operations traditionally have not had a place association with the user community. Libraries haven't had this problem because most members of the academic community have some degree of positive association with library services and with the library as a place. This powerful historical inheritance is clearly an asset as we shape the library of the future. In the emerging environment of networked services, the library as a place would seem to have an exciting future for itself as a center for access and the creation of knowledge. The challenge, of course, is to articulate the service mission and relate it to the continued need for the library as a place.

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