

Collaborations Beyond the Cave: A Consideration of the Sacred in the Creation of Collaborative Library Spaces

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This article examines the tensions and risks inherent in implementing new technologies and collaborative spaces while maintaining the library's critical role as a "civic temple" and knowledge center that inspires and facilitates contemplation and deep thought. New technologies present "disruptive" challenges, having already broken the library's monopoly as an information center and now infiltrating what has been a more cerebral environment with the constant and chronic distractions of a "plugged-in" society. The loss of the physical book presents an additional test to both library identity and library mission, robbing the institution of a vital symbol as well as a tactile gateway to a dialogue with the eternal. Sacred architecture and library architecture share parallels of purpose, and the exploration of sacred architecture may offer clues to how to transition the library into the new technologically and collaboratively rich age.

Introduction

While the rise of the collaborative learning space has opened rich new opportunities, the reconfiguration of the library for enhanced collaboration, whether in a public or academic setting, also presents a challenge that is both singular and critical.

Throughout its history, the library has served dual functions: at a basic level, as society's principal repository of information—the world's first (and for a long period its only) "data bank"—and on a higher level, as a civic temple and knowledge center without equal or rival. The library has been a place where the rigors of reading, meditation, creative "brooding," and deep thinking have been uniquely embraced and cultivated.

With the advent of cyber resources, the library has lost its monopoly on information, a democratization that is to be welcomed, as it furthers the library's goal of information dissemination. However, the loss of the "hard-cover" book must be acknowledged as a net loss, for reasons that will be elaborated, and as old forms of books disappear and as libraries are annexed into school classrooms and are transformed into cyber cafes and "information commons," we also risk losing the library's essential, eternal knowledge function, which is unlikely to be replaced. Today's library may have myriad rivals for attention, and, importantly, funding, but no other social institution stands ready to match the library's effectiveness as an incubator

of deep knowledge or even as a refuge from a world of increasingly constant distraction.

One seldom believes the library can ever return to its old "quiet please" environment; yet, as those involved in creating collaborative library spaces set about their task, they should consider ways to leverage the library's primacy as a civic temple and knowledge center in order to also create the next generation of deep thinkers.

Integrating the Eternal

Consider the surroundings of the libraries of the past: books, books, and more books—books which enlighten, which illuminate, which transport the reader beyond time and space, and which are nothing more and nothing less than the physical manifestations of the thoughts and ideas of writers—writers who, in a public or academic collection, have typically included the world's greatest thinkers, philosophers, scholars and creative artists. The patron's immersion in this duality has meant that from the moment he or she entered the library, a dialogue has been opened with the eternal. Each book is a door, and to walk through old-fashioned library shelves is to pass by innumerable doors to new worlds and thoughts which can be explored immediately simply by opening a cover.

Thus, the concept of the library as a place of solitude has always been something of a fallacy, for the library has always been a place of collaboration—an interior collaboration between reader and writer. In his October 1, 1976 dedication speech for Connecticut College's Shain Library, Kurt Vonnegut (1982) described this alchemical interaction:

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Meditation is holy to me, for I believe that all the secrets of existence and nonexistence are somewhere in our heads. And I believe that reading and writing are the most nourishing forms of meditation anyone has so far found. By reading the writings of the most interesting minds in history, we meditate with our own minds and theirs as well. This to me is a miracle. The motto of this noble library is the motto of all meditators throughout all time: 'Quiet, please.' (p. 165).

Like Vonnegut, other thinkers, scholars, writers and artists have always regarded the library as a sacred refuge, and in creating new spaces that privilege technology and face-to-face collaboration over that eternal collaboration of meditation, we may very well damage the “deep, nearly spiritual commitment” (Foote, 1995, p. 356) libraries have traditionally evoked. Also, by focusing library space so intently on the present, and on what is, ultimately, the relatively small circle of acquaintances and colleagues and fellow students, we may be depriving ourselves of a larger, deeper diversity. We must be mindful that we do not become collaborators in Plato’s Cave.

Moreover, by diminishing the role of the library as civic temple—or as Pulitzer-winning biographer Edmund Morris said of the New York Public Library’s new renovation, turning them into “palaces of presentism” (2012, April 21) —we may be robbing ourselves, permanently, not only of a critical function of the library, but perhaps eventually even the library itself. With information portals and connections proliferating by the day, there will be many structures on campuses and in cities which can serve as inviting collaborative spaces.

It is imperative for their own survival that 21st-century libraries meld technology and semiotics in a way that supports day-to-day educational and social, collaborative pursuits as well as inspiring users to their own dialogues with the eternal.

Writing the Next Chapter Without the Book

Today, the concept of a “book” is mutable, and though library patrons may well have more reading material available than ever before, the “delivery platforms” have been and will continue to evolve, necessitating the question: how, within this new library space, can we best foster a literary environment that is both recognizable, useful and attractive? Though a database located in cyberspace offers a world of possibilities, does it *invite* the reader to explore those possibilities as effectively as physical books? Does it engage? What are we losing in the elimination—or, to say the least, alteration—of the material, tactile experience in browsing? In libraries of the past, those physical surroundings of books have always served as an omnipresent reminder of the many, varied purposes of the

reading, writing, and creative experience, a reminder of other worlds than our own, other times beyond the now. As Price (2011) notes in her recent *New York Times* essay regarding private libraries, the totemic power of the traditional book has been a prime motivator for private collectors and has prompted writers such as Charles Dickens to paint faux library collections on study doors. One wonders what Melville might have made of Price’s description of Google’s office, where:

a dozen flat strips of plywood are glued to the wall at right angles to equally flat vertical strips of paper, each bearing the title of a book. These strips were once spines, sliced from volumes disbound for scanning as part of Google’s enormous digitization project. Like a taxidermist’s trophies, the wall décor attests to a successful slaughter. (2011, paragraph 12)

What is the solution required by a bookless world? Painting fake book spines on walls will surely not be sufficient, and it is neither practical nor desirable to return to the “cave” of a pre-technological era. Yet without that physical and highly visible commonality of the book, that defining totem, what is to separate a library from a city hall or a corporate office? In a “wired” world, it may be wise to look beyond public/civic architecture to sacred architecture which today confronts issues that seem to suggest challenges and opportunities pertinent to libraries of the future.

Seeking Out the Sacred

The parallels in purpose of church and library structures are reasonably straightforward: both must provide public space for gatherings of diverse yet also like-minded individuals; both must additionally offer an atmosphere conducive to private meditation. While the “ecclesiology” of the library may be something of an open question today, surely it at least includes a vision of transcendent enlightenment, the addition, in other words, of a third, spiritual, plane of collaboration, not unlike that which a church must help to facilitate.

This is not to say that religious architecture offers any easy or simple answers, or even any consensus on design principles that might be relied upon to achieve its own spiritual aims, a lack of agreement made clear in the 2007 Yale symposium, “Constructing the Ineffable: Contemporary Sacred Architecture.” More than 500 participants attended this over-subscribed conference which drew some of the world’s leading architects of sacred space, including Richard Meier, designer of the Jubilee Church in Rome, Steven Holl, architect of St. Ignatius Chapel in Seattle, Peter Eisenman, architect of the Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews, and Moshe Safdie,

designer of the Yad Vashem Memorials in Jerusalem.

Participants also included religious leaders such as Rev. Richard Giles, rector of Philadelphia's Episcopal Cathedral, who asserted during his presentation that "there is no one model of space that reflects the ecclesiology of the congregation. Therein, they have one." Still, within the multiplicity of choices, Giles suggested that church "design itself transforms the churchgoers into a congregation by giving its members 'access to the holy things,'" access that may be yielded by achievement in three primary categories, "beauty, participation and hospitality" (Pereyro, 2007, p. 72).

Architect Victor Trahan, in a discussion of his Holy Rosary Church in St. Amant, Louisiana, suggested a slightly different categorization with his "three bridges to the sacred: beauty, memory, and theology." According to Trahan, these bridges "are realized through a careful exploration of form, function, natural light, and materials" (Pereyro, 2007, p. 72).

In reporting on the conference, Ott (2007) notes the gathering's prevailing emphasis on beauty and the contradiction inherent in that emphasis, pointing to the "uneasy relationship between aesthetics and the sacred—a modern reprise of the Platonic tradition's conflation of beauty with the holy" (pp. 73-74). A more significant, and perhaps more ominous, conflation that Ott observed was the fusion, and confusion, of architectural and sacred vision, as reflected by one participant's "pointed" question to Holl "if his Seattle chapel was intended as much to develop the language of the sacred as it was to develop the language of Holl's own hauntingly beautiful signature style" (p. 74). Ott (2007) finds this self-reflexive tendency a worrisome trend, noting:

For thousands of years one of architecture's fundamental tasks was to encapsulate sacred loci—to identify places and forge spaces that helped us mediate our existential concerns and thus transcend instrumental rationality's nihilism. For the past half century, we have rejected all that, emphasizing architectural consumerism as panacea. (p. 74)

Thus, in the case of sacred architecture (and perhaps architecture in general), the principle "form follows function" is complicated by aesthetic affinity as well as the ability and/or desire of the architect to assert his own imprint. These issues are significant in library creation, for they reveal the complexity of the design task, particularly given that the library's institutional identity is in flux. To make a library more beautiful, to create a more distinctive aesthetic for a library (even and perhaps more so in the case of a high-profile "branded" architectural design) will not necessarily make a library more of a "library," nor will it necessarily enhance the inherent value of the library itself.

Appealing Through Order and Aesthetics

Successfully balancing formal with informal, public with private, tradition with innovation are all elements to consider in designing a space that sustains its occupants spiritually as well as ergonomically and materially. Here again, religious architecture offers both questions as well as possible solutions.

Jones' two-volume taxonomy, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison* (2000), suggests that religious architecture is an "event," which unfolds in two halves: congregants' "conversation" and "play" within a sacred space, which consists of a public "front half," which draws in worshipers with a traditional, conventional appearance, and offers in its "back half" a more innovative atmosphere for "play." While Collins (2003) praises Jones' crucial observation "that sacred buildings are not only spatially, but temporally constituted" (p. 142), Alles (2002) is more dubious about Jones' binary categorizations. "I wonder whether people who study strategies of allurements, either in theory (cognitive psychologists) or in practice (marketing specialists) would endorse the notion that simply adhering to conventions allures people" (p. 324).

Formulating an "alluring" synthesis of tradition and innovation creates another sort of challenge, as conflicting assertions of architectural historians Kevin Seasoltz, Thomas Slon and Catsby Leigh reveal. In Seasoltz's *Sense of the Sacred: Theological Foundations of Sacred Architecture and Art* (2005), the author celebrates postmodern architectural interpretations that arise from the belief that "religion and religious experience are communicated, shared, and sustained not primarily through creeds and theological statements but through symbols, myths, metaphors and rituals" (Leigh, 2006, p. 34). Seasoltz (2005) prefers "primal," i.e. "primitive" expressions of religiosity, regarding them as more "pure" than the Western cultural tradition of "intense individualism." Given these preferences, it is perhaps not surprising that he elevates the importance of culture and contemporary community in defining the identity of the church:

Certainly, the church possesses an identity of its own, but it is dependent on cultural phenomena as it seeks to give an expression of its own identity in terms that can be appropriated by contemporary people. (Leigh, 2006, p. 34)

In other words, people shape an amorphous church rather than a church with specificity shaping people. Leigh (2006), on the other hand, decries the stripped-down minimalist abstractions that Seasoltz (2005) admires and laments the effect of post-modernism on religious architecture, on Catholic churches, in particular. According

to Leigh, the post-modern “functionalist delusion” (p. 34) has wrought “anemic” and “anorexic” symbols and bland, multi-purpose buildings, which will “leave the unenlightened stone cold.”

A new church that meets with [Seasoltz'] approval can look like just about anything—a deracinated basilica, a home, a barn, or...an overdesigned university chem lab....Just so long as it isn't monumental and doesn't embrace principles of design that have imbued churches with meaning for well over a thousand years. (Leigh, 2006, p. 35)

Moreover, Leigh (2006) notes laity resistance to post-modernism which Seasoltz (2005) also acknowledges, although he dismisses it as “nostalgia,” suggesting that “good quality is perceived and experienced only by those who are willing to assume a contemplative distance from experience.” Slon (2005) agrees with Seasoltz’s diagnosis; he also views with dismay the fact that “mass-produced statues inspire devotion, while art proposed by artists is rejected by parish committees....Real art seems not to match our liturgical sofas.”

Leigh (2006) rejects these characterizations as elitist and untrue, asserting that Catholics “intuitively” understand that “(a)dherence to tradition generally yields a far higher rate of return on creative effort than does the negation of tradition” (p. 37).

All of these tensions and contradictions pertain to the challenges the library faces, as the institution, by necessity, attempts to maintain and even broaden the nature of its appeal, even as it adjusts to the reduced existence of that material thing, the written word, which has functioned as library’s primary and manifest symbol and icon since the institution’s very beginning.

Leigh’s (2006) call for specificity is pertinent; a building that can be all things to all people risks losing its identity as the one thing that makes it unique and therefore valuable to the community and deemed worthy of its support. Stripping away historical associations dilutes meaning and possibly even purpose. It is hard to imagine a passionate following for a library that feels like a lounge or coffee bar.

Again, the loss of the physical, bound book is crucial. Consider, for example, that religious iconography is by its nature symbolism, yet as Leigh (2006) points out, while further abstraction and symbolization are readily embraced by cultural and architectural “mandarins,” the transformation which creates a “distance” requiring mediation and interpretation is just cause for repudiation on the part of the community at large. Certainly, the rejection exists, whether or not it is valid, as both Seasoltz (2005) and Slon (2005) acknowledge. If the use of symbols in a religious setting results in a loss of immediacy and clarity in meaning, it is difficult to see how the digital

library can evoke or replace books through symbolism, which would, after all, transform a real, material thing and a physical and attractive invitation to experience, into an abstraction. In the Seattle Chapel, Holl shapes the space with seven projecting light boxes to represent elements of Jesuitical worship; through strategic placement of windows, Meier spreads crosses of light across the walls and floor of Jubilee Church and surrounds a glass atrium with cascading and arced walls to suggest the Gothic arch and traditional clerestory. These examples show how new forms may successfully evoke old ideas, but removing books from the library is more than a simple design problem. Losing the tactile experience of browsing shelves may be (slightly) more akin to replacing communion in a Christian church with a painting of the Last Supper.

Minding the Mission, Carving Out Quiet

Again, we return to the relative value of tradition. Should the library embark on a wholesale reinvention of its interior space and facade to insure that the institution be seen as less stuffy and staid and more welcoming, or is it true, as Jones posits, that a traditional “front half” provides more “allure?” Certainly in the library’s earliest incarnation as an “urban shrine,” the reliance on Greek Revival and neoclassical design was inspired in part, according to Kaika and Thielen (2006), by the belief that those ancient styles were not only more “noble,” but also more “palatable” and “publicly acceptable.”

Also, it could be that in exploring traditional religious architecture design we may also find simple and prosaic yet surprisingly effective solutions. The model of the basilica, for example, seems to offer interesting possibilities. The design, which dates back to Roman times, provides a good “sensory” blend, as Gallagher (2001) points out, in coordinating and melding different levels of stimuli, with its broad nave ideally suited to larger crowds, and its colonnaded side aisles offering private spaces for sanctuaries and chapels. Today, the central spaces of many public and school libraries are occupied by banks of computers, a practical arrangement that nevertheless suggests a cross between a factory and an arcade. With more and more patrons and students adopting devices for Internet access, the volume of computers needed by libraries may be reduced so that workstations can be spread out in such side aisles to offer more privacy to users and to suggest a more meditative space.

Each library has its own special needs reflecting stakeholders’ requirements as well as factors such as space allocation and budget. Still, creators and designers must be mindful of the library’s unique meditative mission and seek ways to satisfy that mission within the parameters that are presented.

Aiming For Safe, Sacred and Busy

Obviously, creating a collaborative space that is also a refuge for deeper thought and meditation is a complex challenge. While many of the examples cited here have centered on architecture of the Christian faith, a broader study to include other faiths should also prove fruitful.

In his review of Bess's 2006 work, *Till We Have Built Jerusalem: Architecture, Urbanism and the Sacred*, Garnett (2008) touches on the *urbanist* ideal that "cities should be 'safe, sacred and busy'" (p. 54). Safe, sacred and busy might also describe the ideal atmosphere of the library, and could in fact guide librarians in transitioning library space and library mission into the new technologically and collaboratively rich age.

The library should be safe, a haven where patrons can give free range to thought and imagination, where questions may be freely asked and answers freely given. Librarians should always be aware that safety is more than a physical issue.

The library must also be busy, and while its value as a clearinghouse of information has diminished its role as a "coffeehouse" of ideas is coming to the fore in the new collaborative age. Librarians should be sensitive to the fact that collaboration requires not only physical space but also a social framework.

Above all, librarians should never lose sight of the most important collaboration that the library has historically provided—the collaboration with the eternal. The library must maintain its primacy as a sacred space, or risk losing its identity and relevance in a future of proliferating technologies and cacophonous interactions.

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