

Icons of Learning:

The Redesign of the Modern Library

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Many have considered the digital age and technological innovation as the death knell of libraries. Instead of going quietly into the night, libraries have adapted and evolved to meet the needs of their users. Libraries are more than just repositories of information, they are now places of innovation and inspiration.

A library, in its simplest form, is a repository of knowledge. Libraries contain records of our collective history — the things we know, said, achieved, failed at and hoped for. Libraries show us who we are and who we could be. A society that values libraries is a forward-looking society equipped to succeed in the global village.

Books make up the bulk of information resources available in libraries. Over time, library buildings have come to be regarded as repositories for a variety of print materials such as books, manuscripts, newspapers and periodicals. With advances in media technology, the notion of what makes a library has evolved. Besides books, the modern library now offers other information resources such as photographs, motion pictures, and video and sound recordings for public access.¹

In the current digital age, the library is undergoing what may be its most significant evolution yet. Computers and multimedia stations are now ubiquitous in library reading rooms as a result of the development of digital technology and the popularity of the Internet as a means of accessing information. Libraries have become hybrid spaces offering access to both print and digital resources.²

The needs and expectations of library users are also changing. Users are now able to access information remotely and at any time of day, and have come to expect the delivery of information resources in multiple formats, with round-the-clock online access. The way in which users consume information has also changed — information is shared, sampled and remixed to create new ideas and products. The result is new products incorporating repurposed content.³

WHITHER THE PHYSICAL LIBRARY?

With the growth of digital resources, some have questioned the need for physical libraries. As information resources become

increasingly available online, are physical libraries still necessary? The answer is a resounding yes. Studies show that, despite living in a world where information resources can be accessed remotely, people are still visiting library buildings.⁴ Today's library users are social creatures who continue to value physical libraries because the latter enable shared experiences, communication and interaction.

People continue to use libraries for traditional activities such as borrowing and returning library materials, and as sanctuaries for quiet reading and study. However, gone are the dusty, silent libraries of the past. Libraries are no longer just knowledge repositories; they are now hubs of community life where people connect through collaborative activities.

In a direct counterpoint to faceless interactions in cyberspace, the modern

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library has become a social space that brings people together in a productive learning environment to share, converse, collaborate and co-create. As library users move from content consumption to content creation, libraries have transformed from learning spaces into centres of knowledge production. The focus of library spaces has accordingly shifted from the display of information resources to enabling the activities of the users of those resources.

In short, *materials* have been replaced by *people* at the heart of the modern library.

To remain relevant and accommodate changing user needs and expectations, libraries worldwide are reconceptualising their roles and functions so as to continue to provide access to a range of information resources in a productive learning environment, and support knowledge sharing and collaboration by enabling users to connect both with libraries and with each other. As a result of this paradigm shift, the planning principles guiding library design are also changing as libraries reconfigure their internal spaces and architecture accordingly. In the digital age, the evolving definition of the modern library is driving the remodelling of library services and transforming the face of the library as we know it.

RETHINKING LIBRARY SPACES

While libraries continue their traditional roles as access points for information resources and loan transactions, library spaces are increasingly being reallocated and redesigned. Large physical collections at the centre of reading rooms are making way for groups of people and their activities. Virtual shelves are replacing physical ones as physical collections of print and multimedia resources go online as part of growing digital collections.⁵

To facilitate conversation and collaboration, libraries worldwide are introducing various types of spaces that support group-based activities. To accommodate students and adults who seek space for group discussions, for instance, libraries are introducing digitally connected workspaces with equipment designed for collaboration, laptop charging stations, and modular cluster furniture that users can customise to enhance group interaction. Such workspaces in a library environment that gather collaborators in proximity to



information resources can be a powerful catalyst for the synthesis of knowledge and the generation of ideas.

Media labs are another type of increasingly popular collaborative space. Media labs feature various forms of digital media software and tools that allow users to exercise their creativity and skills in recording, editing and re-mixing digital videos, animations, artworks and music. A good example is YOUmedia, an innovative learning space at the Chicago Public Library’s Harold Washington Library Center designed to inspire collaboration and creativity among young adults.⁶ The facility offers high school teens access to thousands of books, over 100 laptop and desktop computers, and a variety of media creation tools and software such as an in-house recording studio. Through workshops and the guidance of mentors, the teens develop their digital media skills and create digital artefacts such as photographs, songs, videos and blogs, thus building their critical thinking, creative and digital media skills.

In the drive to reconfigure library spaces, some libraries have created blended spaces by co-locating with partners offering complementary services. The Phoenix Parks and Recreation Department and Library Department, for instance, collaborated to create the Verde Library and Maryvale Community Center in Arizona,

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USA.⁷ Opened in 2006, this integrated facility combines a park, community centre and library with an auditorium for public performances and talks. The facility has invigorated the surrounding community: it has demonstrated the natural attraction of the library as a community hub, and the power of partnerships and cross-pollination in bringing people together to create strong communities. The response to the project has been positive: the community centre has the highest foot traffic in the Phoenix Parks Recreation System, and the library has the second highest for Phoenix Public Library branches.⁸

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INSPIRING LIBRARY BUILDINGS

People visit libraries for a variety of activities — to read, do research, discuss project work, attend exhibitions, participate in community meetings and workshops, work away from home, and enjoy multi-media entertainment, among others — but they also want these activities to take place in an inspiring, aesthetically pleasing environment.⁹ As with the internal spaces of libraries, the architecture of library buildings is being transformed. From the futuristic Joe and Rika Mansueto Library¹⁰ at the University of Chicago to the imposing Seattle Public Library, these inspiring buildings are proof that reports of the death of the physical library have been exaggerated.

An inspiring library building is more than the sum of its spaces. It is a symbol of the power of ideas and knowledge, and a declaration of national pride, achievement, history and power. The inspiring libraries of today are incubators of learning and creativity as well as expressions of the learning and creativity they foster. They are statements of who we are as a nation, an assertion of our belief in the value of knowledge as the foundation of a literate and learned society. To stand in a library building of distinctive and innovative design is to be present in a crucible where every idea holds promise and anything is possible.

The Stuttgart City Library in southern Germany is a fine example of an inspiring library building.¹¹ Opened in 2011, the impressive cuboid structure dominates Mailänder Platz, an area slated to become the future city centre. The building is a square five-storey room wrapped in a shell of books. At its heart, a fountain marks a meditative space illuminated by a central roof light.¹² Alluding to the library as a sanctuary akin to a place of worship, the design of the Stuttgart City Library draws its inspiration from that of the Pantheon, the ancient temple to the Roman gods. The building designer, Korean architect Eun Young Yi, based the design on her belief that “Stuttgart’s city library — as the intellectual and cultural centre of urban life — should occupy the position previously attributed to churches and palaces: a ‘foundation stone for a new society and a new spirit’.”¹³ Given the symbolism of its design and the grand presence of the structure, the building has been lauded as “a striking endorsement” of the physical library in the age of digitisation.¹⁴

The Seattle Public Library, designed by renowned architects Rem Koolhaas and Joshua Prince-Ramus, is another outstanding example of inspiring library architecture.¹⁵ The internal spaces of the building are divided into those centred on traditional uses, including an auditorium and meeting rooms; and a series of flexible open floors that can transform to meet future needs. Books are organised in a user-friendly spiral that encourages browsing and discovery, physically expressing the Dewey Decimal System in an arrangement that starts from 000 on the bottom curve to 999 at the top. To encourage creative interactions, the architects created the open-plan Mixing Chamber, a sweeping 19,500-sq-ft “trading floor” where librarians are “experts in a trading room of information” and sought after for their subject expertise and curatorial skills. The chamber features 132 computers, and offers a virtual reference

service via online chat. The building as a whole, says Koolhaas, “is at the same time old-fashioned in terms of resurrecting the public (realm), and contemporary in terms of addressing the key issue of whether the book is still relevant.”¹⁶

Taking the community focus in the design of library spaces and architecture to its logical extreme is the Halifax Central Library in Canada¹⁷ slated for completion in 2014. The building was deliberately planned and designed with extensive public consultation to create a library that would be a community icon, born of the community to serve the community.

The community was consulted on the building design through a series of public and focus group meetings. Residents wanted the new library to provide equal access to rich information resources for knowledge, learning and personal growth

by blending traditional library services with innovative, accessible spaces that could provide opportunities for civic and social interaction. Residents also wanted a library with distinctive and innovative architecture, a civic landmark and a source of pride and inspiration that could contribute to the economic revitalisation of the downtown area and spark cultural and learning activities. All the ideas and feedback gathered at the meetings went towards inspiring the building design.

LIBRARY DESIGN IN SINGAPORE

The development of the library system in Singapore has, until relatively recently, focused on meeting the needs of the population for reading materials and information resources. The establishment of the first full-time public library in



(TOP) The facade of Bishan Public Library. Patrick Bingham-Hall, courtesy of LOOK Architects.

(BOTTOM) The proposed children's area in Halifax Central Library, which is to be completed in 2014. Courtesy of Halifax Public Libraries ©2013.

Queenstown in 1970 was the first step towards creating a network of libraries throughout the island to make libraries accessible to all.¹⁸

Today, libraries play a critical role as the main public advocate of reading and literacy in Singapore. Libraries provide equal access to print and digital resources for all age groups and for all segments of society. Beyond this, libraries in Singapore are well-loved public spaces. When compared with international libraries in other cities with populations of over 1 million people, Singapore libraries ranked second in terms of visits per capita.¹⁹

Singapore's libraries have become social learning hubs. Libraries draw people together in a neutral social space where they interact through shared learning activities such as talks, book clubs and group discussions. By enabling such public interactions, libraries promote

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tolerance, civility and graciousness, and help to build social ties that moderate the behaviour of the community positively. In the current digital age, when people are becoming increasingly disconnected from their communities and socially isolated, libraries play a significant role in ensuring that we remain connected to each other not just remotely through the Internet, but also through close social ties.

Libraries are also becoming social spaces that encourage interaction between people and also between people and information. For instance, libraries are curating exhibitions to initiate interaction between library resources and patrons. Such exhibitions not only showcase the rich collections that libraries offer, but also open a doorway to local history and heritage. The National Library's recent *Campaign City* exhibition, for instance, highlighted diverse efforts in nation-building over the years, and also enabled re-interpretations of these campaigns via artworks by commissioned artists and youth.

Library design is thus important in enabling libraries to remain relevant to users. It impacts the ability of libraries

to reach out to people and to promote social and creative interaction. The re-conceptualisation of libraries and the reshaping of library spaces around user needs acknowledge that libraries are uniquely placed to support the development of a knowledgeable people.

Library design in Singapore has already taken some steps toward the transformative and the inspirational with the creation of the National Library building in 2005,²⁰ Bishan Public Library in 2006,²¹ and the recently launched Library@Chinatown in January 2013.²² The creative use of library space will go a step further with the opening of Library@Orchard in 2014.²³

In order to remain relevant, the re-imagining of future libraries in Singapore must accommodate the changing roles and functions of libraries. The mission of libraries to promote reading and literacy to create readers for life, learning communities and a knowledgeable nation will continue to be important, but Singapore's future libraries must evolve to continue to draw library users through inspiring and transformative spaces and services. ●



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