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Libraries: The Learning Space Within

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Abstract

Today, libraries are no longer viewed as merely spaces that stack books for the specialized few. With the accelerated development in information and communication technology, libraries have become more focused on people and learning processes than on just printed material. As such, the environment where the library user works has become a basic concern more than ever before.

Because libraries are fundamentally about people—how they learn, how they use information, and how they interact in a learning community, the library profession became more concerned with the discussion of the concept of the “Library As A Place”; a concept which goes far beyond the simplicity of introducing a cyber café into a library or emulating the Barnes and Nobel/Starbucks approach.

This perception of the library as a learning space began centuries ago with one of the earliest libraries in history, the Mouseion, meaning the temple of the muses, at Alexandria, better known as the Library of Alexandria. The Mouseion was a research center, a museum, and a venue for celebrating the

arts, inquiry, and scholarship. Indeed, as Dowlin remarks; it represented “the start of libraries that went beyond personal ownership”¹.

This paper gives an overview of the new and diverse elements in library design, and highlights the role of technology as a catalyst in reinventing the library and restoring its role as an institute of learning, culture and intellectual interaction. Using the new Library of Alexandria as an example of this concept of a library, the paper will show how this library, with its new and unique building, has successfully created an atmosphere and a set of intellectual resources conducive to learning, research, discussion, and appreciation of knowledge across the various disciplines. With six specialized libraries, three Museums, a planetarium; an Exploratorium for children’s exhibitions; two permanent exhibitions; six art galleries for temporary exhibitions; a conference center; and eight research institutes, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina has managed to become an embodiment of a true “learning space”.

However, the library as a learning space entails the erection of a multi-functional buildings an endeavor which may have some drawbacks. Discussing these, the paper will briefly list some of the disadvantages of the multifunctional buildings .

¹ Dowlin, Kenneth. “The Library as Place: Challenges in the Digital Age”, In: Bisbrouck. M et al (eds), *Libraries as Places: Buildings for the 21st Century*. Proceedings of the Thirteenth Seminar of IFLA’s Library Buildings and Equipment Section together with IFLA’s Public Libraries Section, Paris, 28 July – 1 August, 2003.

New Elements in Library Design

The form of any edifice is inevitably determined by the function of the proposed building. It is, therefore, only logical to modify our perception of library buildings if we are to embrace the concept of the library as a “learning space” as we must. On the other hand, it is important to recognize that we should not focus on function as the sole target when thinking about library buildings simply because there is a basic “human desire to escape visual tedium [and] to infuse in human creation the diversity and visual interest inherent in nature”².

It is achieving a balance in this complex formula for a new library design that we must address. Given the fact that the formats of knowledge and information have changed and that the advance in technology may be viewed as an alternative medium for the dissemination of knowledge, some may question the validity of constructing libraries in the first place. Notwithstanding the fact that this argument may make sense to many, the value of the physical presence of a library cannot be denied. Consequently, it is the duty of librarians and architects, alike, to comprehend that there is a need to render services and use new technologies in innovative ways to maintain the role of libraries as depositories of knowledge and as catalysts for the development of their community. Indeed, as the renowned writer and critic, Umberto Eco, maintained in a lecture given at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in November 2003 explained, new technologies need not replace books if library services can be improved upon just like cars have not eliminated bicycles over the years.

We must, then rethink our concept of a library and envision it as a place that brings the community together to partake of knowledge in all its formats. Architects and librarians must collaborate to define space according to anticipated user patterns, keeping in mind possible future changes. Doing that requires addressing such issues as a defined paradigm that is aligned to the institution’s mission, objectives and goals and, finally, a democratic approach in decision making which involves all the stakeholders.

Because of the recent changes in the academic environment and the emerging new educational models in the learning process, there must be a change in the way we build libraries as Munitz rightly observes: “You simply don’t have to build a traditional library these days.”³ A library must be a “learning” center rather than a “service” center.

² Webb, T.D (ed). *Building Libraries for the 21st Century: The Shape of Information*, Jefferson & London: McFarland & Co, 2000.

³ Hafner, Katie. “Wiring the Ivory Tower,” *Newsweek* (Jan. 30, 1995), 62.

Sam Demas also pointed out that “As egalitarian common spaces associated with learning and culture they hold a strong appeal. Free and open to everyone, they are distinctly noncommercial and operate on a uniquely communitarian character and business model. Well-run and well-designed libraries serve, in effect, as a form of academic community center.”⁴

As a learning space, the library must provide global access to the wealth of information in all formats; adopt advanced technologies in delivering information and services; provide flexible and adjustable study spaces; include learning and teaching spaces that are adaptable to different learning styles and, finally provide the necessary tools for interactive learning of the Arts and Sciences. More importantly though, is the need to underline the importance of what Edwards identifies as the “Library Building Ten Commandments”⁵ when we reinvent the library as space building. Edwards maintains that library buildings have to be: flexible, compact, accessible, extendible, varied, organized, comfortable, controlled, secure and economical.

While we move towards creating the new learning community, we need not dispose of the traditional library building which can become a centerpiece that is both attractive and appealing; a structure that the institution can be proud of. However, we must alter our concept of book shelves in order to achieve our desired goal of maintaining the position of the library as a center of learning. Bookshelves must be interspersed with seating and located near computer workstations to create a comfortable atmosphere conducive of learning. Likewise, standing workstations for OPAC search should be located near the shelves to facilitate the process of searching collections and databases.

Similarly, acoustics should be considered carefully when designing the new libraries. The spread of noise from atriums or other open spaces should be carefully managed so as to maintain noise at minimum levels when moving to internal spaces. In addition, sound absorbents should be used in carrel roofs. Utilizing natural light through windows or employing a sophisticated lighting system that is self-adjustable, are also of paramount importance to the creation of a comfortable learning environment.

Reinventing the role of the library as a center for learning requires the integration of flexibility as a key concept when designing a library. Keeping in mind the possible changes in users’ learning patterns, we must build flexibility into the library space to enable services to respond to changes.

⁴ Demas, Sam. “ From the Ashes of Alexandria: What’s Happening in the College Library?” in *The Library as Place: Changes in Learning Patterns, Collections, Technology, and Use*, Council on Library and Information Resources: Washington, D.C. 2005.

⁵ Edwards. H, *University Library Building Planning*, Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1990.

This entails allocation of internal spaces, movable partitions, modular interiors and appropriate cable installations in floors and ceilings to allow for the integration of new technology. By the same token, we should endeavor to make the library a place where people choose to spend time by offering them independent access in a highly accessible building which should also meet the requirements of people with disabilities.

It is, however, the role of librarians in enhancing this concept that can truly make a difference because they “need to make sure that they provide a rich space, where human beings can gather, interact, and become more than themselves. If librarians can do that, and do it well, they will be a part of the future”, as Barlow aptly puts it⁶. Nevertheless, creating a library that is more than just a library, in the old traditional sense, is the key to transforming it from a service culture into a learning culture. By combining expert assistance, books, electronic resources, museums, science centers and conference facilities, we can create the “library as a learning space” as has been done at the new Library of Alexandria, the example I will discuss in detail shortly.

The Role of Technology as a Catalyst in Reinventing the Library and Restoring Parts of the Library’s Historic Position as an Institution of Learning, Culture, and Intellectual Interaction.

It is important in this regard to realize that the idea of technology replacing libraries is a falsehood. Instead, we should embrace Freeman’s opinion that: “Rather than threatening the traditional concept of the library, the integration of new information technology has actually become the catalyst that transforms the library into a more vital and critical intellectual center of life at colleges and universities today.”⁷ Therefore, if we wish to see libraries flourishing in the twenty-first century, we must think of a collaborative, interactive, digitized learning context in addition to our print collections.

The fact is: libraries will survive because of the emergence, proliferation and introduction of new digital technologies. Both are interdependent as Frischer eloquently puts it: “in the age of cyberspace, real space and compelling architecture will matter more than ever”.⁸ With the advance in technology,

⁶ Barlow, John Perry. "Librarians as Cyberspace Guerrillas" interview by Ron Chepesiuk, *American Libraries*, 27 (September 1996), 49-51.

⁷ Freeman, Geoffrey T. “The Library as Place: Rethinking Roles Rethinking Space”, in *The Library as Place: Changes in Learning Patterns, Collections, Technology, and Use*, Council on Library and Information Resources: Washington, D.C. 2005.

⁸ Frischer, Bernard. The Ultimate Internet Café: Reflections of a Practicing Digital Humanist about Designing a Future for the Research Library in the Digital Age” (pp.41-55). *Library as Place:*

our sources of information have been diversified and as such, we have come to depend on both printed and digital materials. It is because of this that we need to make our libraries a place where users have access to both formats plus a lot of other resources such as multimedia materials, electronic learning labs, digital projection facilities, computing facilities and automated storage, to mention only a few.⁹

Consequently, when designing new libraries we need to make space for digital technologies that provide interactive and engaging activities that allow users to work in groups or individually and thus enjoy being in the library. This will inevitably lead to fostering the idea of the library as a place for learning where people and ideas can interact regardless of format or location, in the real and virtual environments to expand learning.

However, libraries must also become “producers” of knowledge not simply providers and distributors. By using technology to make research and information gathering easier, and by allotting venues for interactive learning, libraries can become producers of knowledge; a nexus of community connectedness and the home of a learning community that is an intellectual crossroad and a hub of the knowledge network. One such example of a the hub of the knowledge network is the new library of Alexandria.

The New Library of Alexandria

Since its inauguration, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina has taken huge strides towards fulfilling its mission to be a center of excellence in the production and dissemination of knowledge and to be a place of dialogue, learning and understanding between cultures and peoples. The library is dedicated to recapture the spirit of the ancient library and aspires to be:

- The World’s window on Egypt;
- Egypt’s window on the world;
- A leading institution of the digital age; and above all
- A center for learning, tolerance, dialogue and understanding.

To fulfill that role, the new complex is much more than a library. Apart from its function as a library that can hold millions of books, the complex has a center for the Internet and its archive; six specialized libraries for audio-visual materials, the visually impaired, children, young people,

Rethinking Roles, Rethinking Space, Council on Library and Information Resources, Washington D.C, 2005.

⁹ suggested by Sandra Yee, “The Bruce Halle Library at Eastern Michigan University,” appendix to Michael D. Boone, “Architecture, Technology, and Library Design,” *Library Hi Tech* 18 (1) (2000):91, 92

microforms, rare books and special collection. In addition, there are three Museums for antiquities, manuscripts and the history of science. The planetarium and the ALEXploratorium for children's exhibitions, as well as the two permanent exhibitions, enhance the new library's role as a center for learning. With six art galleries for temporary exhibitions and a huge conference center, the library encourages the community to take an active role in the learning process allowing as much room as possible for the different cognitive styles.

Moreover, The Bibliotheca Alexandrina also has seven specialized research institutes and is hosting an eighth as well as a Dialogue Forum. Each of these institutes is concerned with a specific area of knowledge. These are: Manuscripts; Documentation of heritage; Calligraphy and Writing; Information Sciences; Mediterranean and Alexandrian Studies; Arts Center, and Scientific Research. Recently, the library has collaborated with the Suzanne Mubarak Women's International Peace Movement and is hosting its Institute for Peace Studies which was inaugurated in February 2006.

Boasting of an average of five hundred events per year, ranging from concerts to theatre performances, conferences, seminars and workshops, the library invites the public to become active participants in a learning community. Schools have been targeted as part of the outreach programs implemented by the Library Sector, Visits Department, PSC and Arts Center in order to encourage both students and teachers to become active participants in the BA community. Similarly, setting an objective to become a leading institution of the digital age, and seeking to become part of the community, the BA has succeeded in using technology to digitize books, and document and preserve heritage. Thus, by making all its resources available to the public, bringing all forms of knowledge closer to the people, conducting public outreach programs and offering a venue for learning and dialogue, the new Library of Alexandria has truly demonstrated that it is worthy of its heritage and that it is a living example of "libraries as learning spaces".

The disadvantages of multi-functional buildings

There is no such a thing as an absolutely perfect building. Multifunctional buildings can be costly to build and maintain. The diverse activities within these buildings also require a large work force. None of these will make such a venture an inexpensive one.

A good library building must fit well to its community and stakeholders' needs. As public buildings, libraries must deal with the all types of individuals who have different learning styles and physical and cognitive

abilities. Sometime, the different types of activities conflict thus it is important to build in flexibility in both the building structure and management strategy in order for the building to remain vital and attractive. For example, the allocation of a large space for temporary exhibitions at the Library of Alexandria on one of its reading halls, has created a great deal of noise emitting from the visitors who came especially to enjoy the exhibits as well as from the setting up process. This required the library to cease the use of the space in this fashion and modified the plan through building a permanent exhibit to cut down of the high noise level every time the exhibit changes.

In general, when the different activities converge, there is a propensity for high level of noise in multifunctional buildings thus, it is important to maximize noise control mechanisms.

As buildings age and needs change, flexibility and good maintenance remain to be very important factors in the success of a multifunctional learning space. These will facilitate the library's ability to carry its mission.

John Ruskin has eloquently expressed this in his 1851 book of *The Stones of Venice* when he said, "We require from buildings as from men, two kinds of goodness. First, doing their practical duty well; then, that they be graceful as they age and pleasing in doing it."