Not Your Dream Library – The One After That
Creating the "Library-as-Place" suffused with appropriate technologies.
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The Library in Limbo

These are dynamic and somewhat uncertain times for libraries. As libraries increasingly develop their virtual presence and expand digital collections, their physical offerings and spatial presence require reinforcement to maintain relevance in 21st century culture and community.

 At a recent panel discussion with representatives of the facilities departments of several major academic institutions from the Boston area and New England, the panelists universally agreed that they were uncertain about how to plan future library facilities. They could not be confident about what was happening with print and digital collections.   So, they were taking a "wait and see" approach before committing to any major library building expansion or investment. Represented institutions included Harvard University, the University of Massachusetts and the University of New Hampshire – institutions which we would like to believe have invested some advanced thinking in this topic.

However, their collective uncertainty about the future of print and digital information directly impacted their space planning strategies.

Tipping the balance
As an instructor and lecturer on Library Planning and Design, I have been saying (for a decade) that in the period of transition to an increasing percentage of digital content, Library facility expansion was still needed, to make room for computer workstations side by side with the growing physical collections. Now, with the advent of increasingly cheaper eReaders, and an increasing number of titles available as eBooks, we are at a tipping point where the pressure for more space in libraries (if it exists) is independent of collection size.

The Press

According to the popular press, the Internet has replaced the Library as the storehouse of all human knowledge – a sort of new "Library of Babel." A recent article in the New Haven Register informs its readers that the internet is the repository for all recorded human knowledge and that all libraries contents " can be accessed through a smart phone in seconds" and reminds us of the "fact" that "nearly every manuscript [sic] printed has been scanned into an instantly accessible database."

The hyperbole in the popular press – a sort of "New Technology Utopianism" may not quite yet be reality, but it influences popular perceptions of libraries. This perception poses a challenge to the idea any physical Library space is needed whatsoever and perhaps a challenge to the existence of the physical Library altogether.

The architectural press, on the other hand, celebrates nearly bookless libraries, as the example the March, 2011 edition of Architectural Record indicates by featuring the Musashino Art University Library on the cover. With immensely tall and empty shelves establishing the architectural *parti* for the building, the architect rationalizes and, indeed celebrates the emptiness: "If you fill up all the shelves, its just a bookcase. But if you leave it part empty, it is full of potential."

Between the misconceptions of the internet as the omniscient and omnipresent provider of free and reliable information and the architectural spatial purity of the Bookless Library, there exists the actual current library and the appropriate future library for the digital age.

The Digital Threat/Opportunity

As digital information proliferates, the Library role as storehouse for information is transcended and the relevance of the physical Library questioned . While library advocates may know that there is more opportunity for libraries to fulfill their core missions in the in the digital age, the general population does not necessarily perceive opportunity and sees threats instead.

As the digital information age advances, communities wonder why (or whether) people will continue to come to the library. Therefore, they increasingly question the wisdom of investing in library buildings, since they are perceived as obsolete book warehouses. In this way the impact of the Digital Age on Library Space is manifest as a threat to the very existence of library space in the future. I have seen this phenomenon repeated at Town

Meetings in New England, where, for example, a resident literally chucked a brick over his shoulder while at the podium and proclaimed that the future of the library is not in bricks and mortar, but in the laptop computer that was being held high in his other hand. The presentation was effective and the community voted down the motion to expand and improve the library building.

Size Factor/Human Factor

The shrinking technology represented in the laptop held aloft seems to be contributing to the digital threat to physical libraries. Computers are getting smaller and smaller even as they get more powerful. An iphone is more powerful than a desktop computer from a decade ago. Digital information storage devices have gotten smaller and smaller and now have evaporated into a "cloud" as users access remotely stored applications and data from their client devices which are connected to servers via internet portals.

In the midst of all this shrinking and changing technology there is a constant. That constant is People.   People have not evolved at the same pace as technology. Of course, technology evolves in response to human demands, but the pursuit of smallness is not universally preferable. After all, people have not gotten smaller. People can and do carry about tiny screens backed by powerful processors, and use them everywhere within the library (or more pointedly <u>without</u>) the library. However, we still need to use the same five or six senses to get that information into our consciousness and contribute to our intellect.

Absorbing information through tiny visual portals is limiting. Perhaps not *excessively* limiting if the majority of the books we might be interested in (eBooks or otherwise) are just text or "dime store fiction" per Amazon eBook stats. However, if text is supported by graphics, (or in the case of graphic novels, practically replaced by graphics) then the information gathering experience is compromised and we are left looking at the information world through a "drinking straw" and have to piece together our observations from visual fragments.

Even with tangible books, if we have multiple volumes to review, then the ability to spread them out on the library table and have visual access to more content at once is an asset to effective and efficient research. Thomas Jefferson realized that even his library table was inadequate so built a turntable that held 5 more books

in an open position so that more information was accessible at once. This enhanced learning functionality is not characteristic of shrinking portable technology.

The Future (as it should be?)

The obvious upside to reduced storage needs for library collections is the increased availability of space for library users - <u>people</u>.

People Space
The reduced competition for library space means that libraries will have the opportunity to create space (or transform existing) spaces into quality environments to interface with collections (even <u>print</u> collections), or engage with other users in spaces with a tapestry of ambiances - from ambiances of scholarship and personal advancement to ambiances of educational entertainment and serendipitous learning - all in an information resource rich environment.

The future of public library facilities – as physical places – will depend in part on the quality of spaces that they provide. The criteria used to define "quality" for library spaces will be established relative to the ability to meet the needs of people. So, while providing space for collection storage and space for merchandising that collection may remain important, the places where people dwell in the library – as individuals, pairs of individuals, and small and large groups – will need to be properly shaped and appointed for success. If we as library planners do not get this right, we run the risk of creating library buildings that are potentially increasingly irrelevant to future users.

As we consider the library in an age characterized by a proliferation of every type of portal to information, we see an evolving diagram.   Initially there were the collections (books), and the books were rare and precious and therefore central. Patrons were drawn to the books. The library protected the books and people were accommodated peripherally to the needs of the books. This sounds like a description of an ancient library, but the model persists today. This model will not establish a successful future "draw" and will not be the right spatial character to attract future patrons.

In this Information Proliferation Age, libraries must transition from Book-Centric concepts to People-Centric concepts, and from Collection Storage-Centric (or even Collection Circulation–Centric) to Collection Use-Centric. Because information can be garnered anywhere, the

quality of the space for people will be increasingly important to attract people to the physical library – they will be drawn to space that is configured to meet their needs, as individuals or groups, to be comfortable, focused, inspired and productive with the tools to they need to use and share information. Merely accessing collections and information is not a primary criteria.

So, "people space" is thematically central to architects and planners as they shape enticing future library environments. The intended goal for these environments will be to become a preferred destination place in the community - places that support a community of learners, with access to technology and production materials and evices. Librarians surround or flank that people-centrality with the resources that are essential to a *particular* community.

Technology Infusion

Library environments which are tuned to take advantage of the Digital Age will naturally include more advanced information access devices than we might have at home or can carry with us to the library. These Library devices and connections will mean faster access to better, vetted information. The corresponding Library environments will provide us with more real estate from our digital content appliances upon which we can array our data and from which we can consume our digital information.   In these libraries, we will take advantage of multiple large (touchscreen?) displays to facilitate visualization and manipulation of information.

In addition, successful future library spaces will integrate digital information access devices for use anywhere within the Library (and again, <u>without </u>or beyond) the library, will provide portable digitization equipment, expansive displays, collaborative study and production spaces and program and presentation spaces. , successful future library environments will be designed Accomoating these digitally enhanced functions will be important forces that will shape some of the future library environments.

Facilitating Transformation

OCLC pointed out, in their 2008 publication, "From Awareness to Funding" that a way for Library projects to continue to get community support is to avoid representing libraries as storehouse or even purveyors of information.   Libraries that redefine themselves as vehicles for *transformation* will be both more likely to garner community support as well as be more faithful to their core mission and goals. Transitioning to being

recognized as the place to <u>use</u> and <u>share</u> information rather than just a place where information is stored and accessed by individual patrons is critical to libraries in the Information Proliferation Age.

The positive transformations that are possible at the library can be enhanced by digital information appliances that are not only portals to information but are also vehicles for <u>using</u> the digital information that is garnered, for <u>sharing</u> digital content between users, and for <u>developing new content</u> that can then be contributed to the digital information pool.

This is the library design challenge we now face. Creating the appropriate space for the digital transition will highlight what can be accomplished <u>at the library</u> that cannot be done everywhere else - or anywhere else.

Conclusion

If the opportunities of technology can be integrated with the appropriately configured and appointed people space, then there is potential to create a host of meaningful, transformational experiences in the library. These positive individual experiences collectively create community-wide relevance for the library and establish support for developing and supporting the library of the future.