THE PHYSICAL AND DIGITAL LIBRARIES ENVIRONMENT– A PLACE FOR COMMUNITY, CONTEMPLATION

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Abstract

This article explores the physical-conceptual continuum occupied by both digital and physical libraries environment a place for community, contemplation. The issue of materials and the ideas they represent is considered. Places for people are considered, including issues of people's sense of place in physical and digital spaces. The issue of physical and digital spaces as places for work, collaboration, and community-building is considered and model of success.

Introduction

The distinction between physical and digital libraries is thus not always a clear one. For the sake of this discussion, physical libraries are considered to maintain a collection of exclusively physical materials, while digital libraries are considered to maintain a collection of exclusively electronic materials. In between these two extremes is the more typical physical library that maintains digital components, such as digitized representations of physical materials in its collection.

One of the fascinating things that we are now observing is the impact of redesigned library space on the so-called "psychosocial" aspects of an academic community. The library's primary role is to advance and enrich the student's educational experience; however, by cutting across all disciplines and functions, the library also serves a significant social role. It is a place where

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people come together on levels and in ways that they might not in the residence hall, classroom, or off-campus location. Upon entering the library, the student becomes part of a larger community a community that endows one with a greater sense of self and higher purpose. Students inform us that they want their library to "feel bigger than they are." They want to be part of the richness of the tradition of scholarship as well as its expectation of the future. They want to experience a sense of inspiration. While students are intensely engaged in using new technologies, they also want to enjoy the library as a contemplative oasis. Interestingly, a significant majority of students still considers the traditional reading room their favorite area of the library the great, vaulted, light-filled space, whose walls are lined with books they may never pull off the shelf. The Planning Process

The Physical Library as Place

Libraries have long served as important places for people to work, think, and collaborate. Many academic libraries are literally cathedrals of learning with impressive architectural features. The new Seattle Public Library Central branch (www.spl.org) is a contemporary example of how libraries may work with architects and artists to craft spatial messages for users. In essence, library spaces are used as much to inspire ideas and feelings as they are to serve utilitarian functions. However, some new library places are beginning to directly address new library space models where the library is really a hybrid physical and digital place. For example, in describing the new health sciences library building at the University of Maryland, Weise (2004) writes, "we have done our best to provide [users] with services so they won't have to come to the library" (p. 10). Likewise, projects are underway at the University of British Columbia and the California State University at Northridge to replace the existing academic library with a learning center where human-oriented workspaces are in one wing and the physical materials are stored in another wing, in temperature-controlled (cold) compact storage attended by Automated Storage and Retrieval Systems (www.library.ubc.ca/home/asrs/; Kirsch, 1999).

Two related social forces that have generated considerable thinking about libraries as places are the popularization of the Internet, and the appearance of large chain bookstores such as Barnes and Noble and Borders. Interestingly, these two forces emerged in close temporal proximity in the mid-1990s. As anyone who has been to a shopping mall in the past decade knows, these

bookstores contain comfortable chairs in lounge-like seating areas, childrens' play spaces, and coffee bars. Essentially, these bookstores attempt to fulfill the role of what Oldenburg (1999) refers to as "third places." The first two places are the home and the workplace, while the third place is an exclusively social place: the town commons, the street corner, or the local pub, for example. Third places are "public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals" (p. 16). As Coffman (1998) points out, these bookstores deliberately attempt to create third place-style environments by offering inviting surroundings and a schedule of events.

The advent of such "third place" bookstores led Coffman (1998) to pose the question, "what if you ran your library like a bookstore?" The Multnomah County Library in Oregon was one of the first libraries to offer a coffee bar, partnering with Starbucks Coffee in 1997 (MacLeod, 1998). Since then, many other libraries – both public and academic – have added coffee bars. Coffee bars are, however, simply one instantiation of a larger trend in libraries to create spaces that will be appealing to users and can serve as social spaces. There is a particular concern to appeal to undergraduates who, with the advent of the World Wide Web, some believe to be using the library less and less. Carlson's (2001) article entitled The Deserted Library portrayed a situation in which the increasing use of electronic materials by students meant a decreasing use of materials and services within the library building. This article caused a certain degree of panic in the academic library world, even, as Albanese (2003) reported, causing academic library directors to resign. This trend may also have influenced decisions in the late 1990s and early 2000s to spend money on academic libraries, both renovations to existing buildings and construction of new library buildings2 (Fox, 2002).

The Electronic Environment as Place

In a digital library, this philosophy of design may lead to a focus on what, in a physical library, is referred to as "signage": the labeling of areas where materials or services are located so that the user may easily find them. Different digital libraries take different approaches to signage. As discussed above, in a digital space, the classification scheme is equivalent to the organization of the space. Further, the subset of the classification scheme that is available to the user is equivalent to signage. Two examples will illustrate this point. The Math Forum (mathforum.org),

organizes its collection according to topic and grade level. The Digital Library for Earth System Education (DLESE, dlese.org) provides four simple classification schemes by which a user may access the collection: Grade level, Resource type, Collections, and Standards. These classification schemes are both how the materials in the digital library's collection are organized, and according to which the materials are accessed by users.

Another distinction between physical and electronic environments as spaces is that of the accessibility of the materials in those spaces. In a physical library, the user can gain access to the collection only by physically coming to the library. In a digital library, the user can gain access to the collection electronically from anywhere without physically going to the library. An interesting situation exists for physical libraries that maintain electronic components, however: electronic materials are not accessible physically, and physical materials are not accessible electronically. Thus, the physical library has two mutually inaccessible collections, the physical and the digital. In many cases, physical libraries do have physical and digital versions of the same work (which usually means distinct costs); we suggest, however, that the very format of representation supports different types of value-added services that make users' experiences with the same intellectual work quite different. It is here where the issues raised by the environment of the library as place diverge most strongly: if the user is using digital materials, whether the user is in a physical library or at home or work, the experience will be more similar than if the user is using physical materials for the same work in the library or at home. In essence, the user's experience of the library as place is more dependent on the form of the material and what additional services the library provides than it is on whether the user's body is in a physical library or elsewhere using a digital library.

While physical and digital collections are mutually exclusive, the physical and digital spaces "inhabited" by users of these collections are not. Rather, these spaces overlap, or are superimposed upon one another. A user may be present in both a physical and a digital library simultaneously, or may be present in some third place and making use of both digital resources and physical services (e.g., interlibrary loan). In sum, a continuum of environments exist, ranging from entirely physical to entirely digital, with a range of hybrids. Spaces at the physical end of this continuum have the capacity to strongly affect the user's experience: for example, as

mentioned above, both cathedrals and the new Seattle Public Library main branch are masterful architectural works that craft spatial messages. Spaces at the digital end of this continuum, on the other hand, are impoverished by comparison. Many online "spaces" are impressive feats of technical expertise and data visualization (see, for example, the Atlas of Cyberspaces (www.cybergeography.org/atlas/) for some of the most cutting-edge of these spaces) but many, if not most, are indistinguishable from places of work or play because the same physical devices and interaction styles are required by the constraints of the technology.

Consequently, physical libraries may be awesome and inspiring, while current digital libraries are impoverished spaces. These awesome and inspiring spaces, however, may be highly constraining, requiring considerable human effort to access the ideas contained in the space, while the impoverished digital space may enable more direct access to those ideas. Thus, the classic architectural tension between form and function is quite vivid in libraries, both physical and digital.

Model of success

The best institutions of higher learning understand that their libraries are the heart of intellectual inquiry. Libraries provide or mediate access to many physical and digital resources for students, faculty and researchers, wherever their location. Libraries also provide digital and physical spaces for collaborative learning and research, free ranging intellectual discourse, cultural expression and housing of historically significant materials. Even in the digital age, the library building as a place -- redesigned to foster collaboration among students, faculty and staff -- maintains an essential role in academia.

Conclusion

As libraries, both digital and physical libraries fulfill the same functions: both are cognitive spaces that can be intellectually moved through and modified to suit cognitive needs. As spaces, digital and physical libraries differ in their capacity to fulfill the same functions. Digital libraries are unable to fulfill some of the functions of the physical library as physical spaces, but are able to offer functions beyond what the physical library can offer as cognitive spaces.

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