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Dissecting the disconnect

Thinking about public space in academic libraries

> *There is no question but that a stimulating book arouses energy and tension which requires release. Sometimes this is done by a sharp exclamation of agreement or disagreement or by underlining some crucial passage (a practice keenly discouraged by librarians when the books are library property), but it is intensely frustrating to acquire insight in a public place without being allowed to exclaim "Ah-ha!"*
>
> —Robert Sommer[1]

How many times have you witnessed colleagues recoiling from the noise of active, communal spaces in their libraries? "I can't hear myself think!" they cry, leaving you to surmise that they barely survived another dizzying shift on the reference desk. While it is easy to understand the need to keep order (and peace) in a changing world, I also find meaning and purpose in the uncomplicated way students take ownership of "our" public spaces: their claim on furniture (and the floor!) for sleeping, their inventive use of modular furniture to craft impromptu meeting places, their anger at being denied access in the early morning and late evening hours. These are just a few symptoms of the growing disconnect between the way students use, and the way librarians and planners develop, the spatial properties of academic libraries. The resulting tension motivates a rethinking of purpose and a re-approach of design principles and practices. One way to begin this investigation is by exploring relevant social theories and investigating practical strategies developed to better understand and improve public spaces.

The physical and nonphysical place

Many social constructionists maintain that place is doubly constructed; i.e., there is both a physical and a nonphysical construction of place. The dark, lonely corner in a microtext reading room is a place of enlightenment for the scholar discovering a crucial piece of information in an unpublished parliamentary paper; it is a place of anxiety for the uninitiated undergraduate tasked with using a strange bit of plastic to display eye-readable text needed for a major assignment; or it is a place of lust and excitement for an amorous couple seeking privacy. This corner represents a unique place (and experience) for each of its users, while its physical elements remain relatively static. The unfolding multiplicity of library space is important and often unpredictable. The library is a place of refuge for students trying to escape the harried halls of residence but also an active gathering place for collaborative and social learning when group work or networking is required. Sound can be interpreted as noise or as a supportive backdrop to focused study. As librarians, we need to recognize the futility of trying to create spaces that are all things to all people and focus on producing public places that are as *democratic, responsive,* and *meaningful* as possible.[2]

Democratic spaces provide access to all potential library users and offer a high level of freedom of action. While this might sound

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reasonable and obvious, social theorists remind us that the construction of place is informed by social relations, which shape our often unconscious understanding of how and where we fit into society. A professor expects a different outcome than an undergraduate when asking to remove a reference item from the collection. More and more often, campus library computers are accessible only through institutionally sanctioned logins. Community members are defined as secondary users, required to create a guest account and sometimes even pay for the privilege of accessing information, much of which is funded by tax dollars.

The creation and understanding of public space is increasingly explored as a function of social relations and, more to the point, power relationships. One of the more heavily cited theorists in academic public space circles (especially social geography, urban and environmental studies, and planning) is Henri Lefebvre. His work *The Production of Space*[3] was originally published in 1974 with an English translation following in 1991, the year of his death. The *use* of his spatial triad as a conceptual framework for unpacking the idea of social space is relatively consistent across academic disciplines, although interpretations vary.

Three elements of space

In essence, Lefebvre's triad identifies three overlapping and continually intersecting (i.e., dialectical) elements of space in a social context (think of a three dimensional Venn diagram). The elements of the triad are: representations of space, representational space, and spatial practices. Representations of space are conceived spaces described by those with the power to alter existing spaces; e.g., librarians creating a Learning Commons floor plan. Representational space is lived space that can be physical or symbolic or both; e.g., students' expectations of what they can (or cannot) do in the Learning Commons, informed by their prior experiences and understanding of library spaces. Spatial practices are the actual interactions in a space, made up of both physical and social components; e.g., the students' actual Learning Commons activities, including the act of writing a paper, the awareness that academic technicians are available to assist in the process, and the students' understanding that the professor will ultimately be grading the work. While this is only one interpretation of the triad, and a relatively simplified one at that, Lefebvre's work offers librarians an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the public spaces they physically create and manage. Each library user realizes a unique experience of library spaces, one that is shaped and formed by their past interactions, their unfolding activities, and the physical environment (bound inextricably with the social environment) that we conceive, produce, and attempt to manage.

Four keys to a successful space

Public space management is perhaps the most important "real-world" practice that determines whether our users and, indeed, all library stakeholders interpret our spaces as "successful." Simply put, responsive public spaces are designed and managed to meet the needs of users. Determining the level of responsiveness a space offers requires a partnered, continuous assessment process.

It is encouraging that librarians are beginning to work with organizations like the Project for Public Spaces (PPS) to help with these tasks.[4] Informed by urban studies, anthropology, and more than 30 years of community building through public space analysis, PPS has developed a simple yet robust multimethod approach that includes observation and end-user input (via questionnaires and interviews). Its four key qualitative attributes of successful public spaces are access and linkages, uses and activities, comfort and image, sociability.[5] Each attribute is comprised of intangibles, which PPS suggests can be measured with empirical data. For example, the attribute of uses and activities includes the intangibles of active, fun, vital, special, useful, etc., which are measured by collecting data on retail sales (transactions) and rent levels (demand), among others. While designed for public spaces in communities, the method can be partially adapted for library environments.

As with all methods, care must be taken to identify what is measured and how the data will be interpreted. In addition, it has long been recognized that quantitative assessment must be complemented with subjective appraisal to generate a more holistic understanding of how and why library users interpret and use library spaces. Gate counts, circulation figures, and reference statistics only tell part of the story at best and offer no insights into the phenomenological experience of the library as place. While there have been some multi-method attempts to better understand library space use patterns,[6] there seems to be little interest in methodically assessing the library space use experience. In fact, Shill and Tonner noted that "there are no systematic, empirical studies documenting the impact of enhanced library buildings on student usage of the physical library."[7]

Perhaps the current dearth of well-rounded research is due in part to the nature of previous library space use studies. Library studies in environment-behavior research often focused on issues of privacy regulation, territoriality, and seating preferences. While the results of this work proved enlightening and valuable, our interest must shift from symptom to cause. This is especially important in our current context, where academic libraries are in direct competition with other information providers on campus and are losing the unique features of their public spaces.[8] Instead of asking "how" through a reductionist lens, we must ask "why" through a phenomenological kaleidoscope.

Why are users drawn to the physical academic library and what factors affect the construction of meaning and the development of attachment? How can one visit—one rotation of the turnstile —have the potential to change a life while 40 visits in as many days can be all but forgotten?

Understanding the role and strength of the personal connection individuals develop *with* a specific place; i.e., how the experience creates *meaning,* is explored as place attachment, place identity, or sense of place by human and social geographers as well as environmental psychologists and sociologists.

The affective bond underpinning this phenomenon is complicated, dynamic, and unique. Thus, exploring the construction of meaning is best attempted through qualitative study that includes both users and non-users of the physical academic library. Interviews and questionnaires that target individuals with an existing and strong library connection will only provide a partial picture of our current situation. Worse, they will provide very little information about how we need to alter our public spaces to respond to changes in our environment.

The functions of an academic library are bounded by the broader campus community, an environment that provides context for our users as they navigate and produce the social relations that inform their expectations of our services and physical spaces. These broader relationships are increasingly defined by changes in technology and scholarly communication patterns, which in turn alter the way academic libraries are perceived and used.

Historically, attempts by students and faculty to interpret the physical library as a place of meaning were natural extensions of their relationship with the broader institution. If they continue to successfully create these linkages, our public spaces with thrive. If they fail (i.e., if the disconnect between expectation and experience is too great), our public spaces will decay in their absence. While we cannot meet the spatial needs of every user at every point in their academic journey, we can produce public spaces that are informed by the higher order attributes of accessibility (democratic) and relevance (responsive), providing our users with the opportunity to create meaningful spaces.

Notes

1. Robert Sommer, "The ecology of privacy," *Library Quarterly,* 36 (1966): 234–48.

2. These ideas are explored in Stephen Carr, et al., *Public space* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

3. Henri Lefebvre, *The production of space,* trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992).

4. See www.pps.org/civic_centers/ for links to examples of PPS library projects. In addition, PPS staff participated in a BCLA 2008 pre-conference and are invited speakers at the OLA Super Conference in 2009.

5. Project for Public Spaces, *How to turn a place around* (New York, NY: Project for Public Spaces, 2002).

6. For relevant examples using observation, questionnaires, and interviews, see Gloria Leckie and John Hopkins, "The public place of central libraries: Findings from Toronto and Vancouver," *Library Quarterly,* 72 (2002): 326-372. and Howard Silver, "Use of collaborative spaces in an academic library" (PhD diss., Simmons College, 2007), digitalcommons.bryant.edu/library_misc/1

7. Harold Shill and Shawn Tonner, "Creating a better place: Physical improvements in academic libraries, 1995 – 2002," *College & Research Libraries,* 64 (2003): 431–66.

8. Lyman Ross and Pongracz Sennyey, "The library is dead, long live the library! The practice of academic librarianship and the digital revolution," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship,* 34 (2008): 145–52.

("Clever outreach…" cont. from page 14)

medium, and our attempts to assess their value, are still a "work in progress." I believe that the value of immersing in a medium strongly favored by students, and becoming more familiar with their styles of engagement, is difficult to fully or fairly evaluate. We've learned that Facebook activities can lead to useful information about students' preferences, positive press coverage, terrific testimonials, and rewarding extensions of established relationships. These benefits, though prized, are not predictable.

Facebook is worth more to us than those rewards. Our work on Facebook opens the door for us to the conversations, diversions, attitudes, and social habits of one of our critical audiences. To serve this group well, it helps to understand them as best we can.

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