Michelle Twait

If they build it, they will come

A student-designed library

In the fall of 2007, I was working on a proposal for a January-term course entitled "Library as Place." I wanted students to have a sense of the cultural, historical, and social roles libraries play and to think about how space and place shape those roles. I also hoped to have students consider the library's role as a "third place" (not home, not work) and the library as a learning commons. January term, a four-week term in which students are immersed in one subject, is an ideal time for experiential learning.

Knowing this, I wanted to go beyond readings and reflection papers. I mentioned this to my colleague and asked for her advice. She suggested that I ask the students to redesign the library. Brilliant! I loved the idea too much to let my practical side ("But you only have a month!") rule my thinking.

A student's design of a library "cool room."
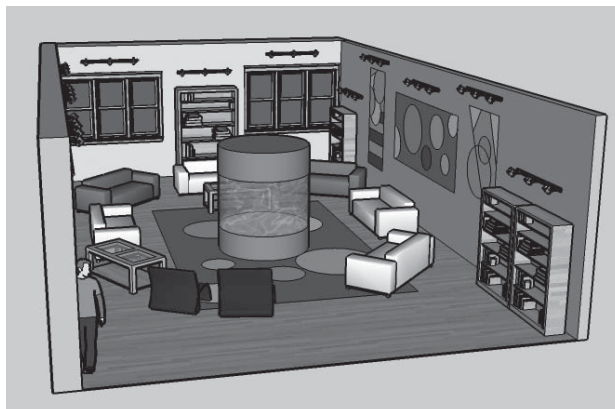
Planning the course

In preparation for the course, I gathered readings on library design, "green" building, and accessibility. I lined up architects, a library design consultant, the college's physical plant director, the college archivist, and library staff as guest speakers. I planned for a tour of a nearby university library.

As the registration deadline approached, I suspected art majors, bibliophiles, and those with a casual interest in architecture might be interested in the class.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

Ten students registered for the course—not a single art major among them. Instead, they were business majors, one biology major, one health exercise science major, and one education major. A few were undecided. Furthermore, they were primarily sophomore students, joined by two first-year students and two seniors.

Curious, I asked them on the first day of class to tell me what drew them to this course. Their responses? "I would like to learn how to use libraries more effectively." "I never really enjoyed spending time at the library so I thought I could take this course and eventually accept the library as a functioning place in my life." "Libraries are good."

(I later discovered that most of them knew one another. In fact, I had two sets of roommates in the course and two couples who were dating. I'm guessing that was probably the most significant factor in their decision to take the course!)

I had my work cut out for me.

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We began class by discussing the purpose and function of libraries and how that has changed over time. We talked about who uses the library, how they use it, and how usage changes at different times of the year or with different academic needs. Over the course of the first week, we read essays on "library as place" and looked at examples of recent library redesigns. The college archivist spoke to them about the various iterations the library had gone through. We took a tour of the library, including the staff areas. (It was during the tour that I learned that several students had not been beyond the main floor!)

Week one

Their first assignment was to sketch their favorite study space. They drew dorm rooms, campus lounges, their parents' living rooms—no one drew a space in the library. I discovered that this group did not spend a lot of time in the library and did not care to study there.

Yikes. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all.

I asked them to explain why they didn't study in the library. The floodgates opened: "The walls are painted that institutional eggshell white." "The harsh florescent lighting." "The dark brick everywhere." Well, okay, what *did* they want? Natural lighting, a café, traditional reading rooms, a 24/7 space, a conference room, individual lamps for the study carrels, longer couches (the library's current "loveseats" were not long enough to stretch out and sleep on), more individual study rooms, and a "grand" entrance. They talked about "softer, more indirect lighting," "warm colors," "comfort," "rooms that inspire," and "welcoming spaces."

Week two

The second week, we pondered Scott Bennett's "First Questions for Designing Higher Education Learning Spaces."[1] We also began to think about how we would gather the kind of information needed to answer those questions. Concurrently, I provided them with data from focus groups the library had conducted and the results of a project a marketing class

had conducted on space usage in the library. Students spent a few days conducting field observation research in the library. While I encouraged them to be creative in their designs, I also emphasized the importance of informed opinions.

In an attempt to show students the relationship between theory and practice, our second week included guest speakers and site visits. The library's own "space committee," a group charged with "evaluating space utilization by examining space needs," paid a visit to the class to share some of the staff's priorities in a redesign. The next day, the class met at a local coffee shop to discern what we might learn from the design of bookstores and cafés.

The college's physical plant director stopped by the following day, bearing blueprints. He helped the class understand how a proposed expansion to the library would impact campus traffic patterns and addressed the students' suggestion for a skywalk between the expansion and a new academic building. Later that week, we toured a nearby academic library and also had an instruction session there so that students would have an introduction to LISA and LibraryLit. On Friday of that week, two architects led a discussion about "visioning workshops," which are sessions where clients respond to images presented by the architects and express their preferences. The architects also helped the students think about the various ways to present their design ideas.

The architects mentioned a freely available 3-D modeling software to the students, but suggested that students stick with cardboard models or even use interlocking blocks. After class, a couple of students indicated that they would like to use the software for their designs. Others nodded their heads in agreement. They asked if we might devote part of a class period to at least exploring the possibility. Slightly stunned, I said yes, but cautioned them that we had only two weeks until their final projects were due – this might be biting off more than they could chew. They were insistent.
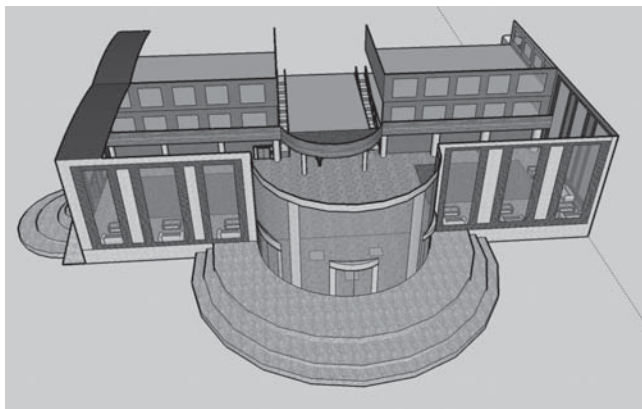
Week three

When class met on Monday, we organized an amateur visioning workshop. Students had been asked to identify what pieces of the redesign they wanted to work on and to come prepared to show their classmates pictures that exemplified their vision for the new space. Students were eager to share their ideas. It was an excellent opportunity to discuss how to unify their diverse ideas ("Can we really have the traditional reading room with the mahogany woodwork next to the room with the abstract art and ultra-modern furniture?"). It was also the first step toward the final project, which would be one design for a renovated library, with each student managing an aspect of it.

One student wanted to work on the "grand entrance" idea, another was interested in the exterior design of the building, and one brave student volunteered to coordinate the interior layout. Most students chose some part of the interior (24/7 study space, meeting rooms, service points, reading rooms, computer lab, café, and atrium). It became clear that it was my job to worry about the collections. On Tuesday, students shared these ideas with a professional library consultant, who helped us think about flow and consistency of design. On Wednesday, we met in a computer lab to begin exploring the 3-D modeling software. At the end of an hour, several students had created models for the basic elements of their designs. Convinced, I told them we would meet in the lab the following week so that they could continue work on their 3-D models.

Week four

The final week of the class was largely devoted to design. I acted as the "guide on the side," providing more information when needed (the dimensions of the exterior of the existing building, definitions for library jargon, suggesting resources for further exploration of an issue) and bringing the group together when big picture decisions needed to be made. I encouraged students to work with their peers to resolve sticky issues. In one instance, the student working on the design of the café sought out the two students working on the exterior and entrance of the building to discuss a possible change in the location of the café. Other students, overhearing the conversation, became involved, offering their opinions and advice. The group then moved over to the chalkboard where they began sketching. This type of collaborative work was not uncommon. Furthermore, students recognized their interdependence in this project and the strengths of each member of their team. For example, students who were especially adept at using the modeling software assisted others in creating their models. Other students were more talented in selecting colors and textures; some shared their research with others; none were shy when offering suggestions to classmates who were struggling with a design issue.

In addition to their work in class, I discovered that some students were going above and beyond the requirements of the assignment. One student contacted a greenhouse manager to learn more about double-paned glass (he was concerned about heating and cooling a café space with lots of natural light). Another contacted an architect to get recommendations on how best to connect the library addition to an existing building.

Observing their interactions and hearing their questions, it was clear that students appreciated the need to understand how

One student's idea for a library "grand entrance."

libraries function in order to design an effective building. They discussed the teaching philosophy of the library and how that might be reflected in the service points; they considered how compact shelving might negatively impact the serendipity of browsing; debated the pros and cons of natural lighting (people versus materials); and researched how design could influence creativity and collaboration. Students' request for a "grand entrance" also reflects their clear appreciation for the cultural and civic significance of libraries. As one student wrote in his final paper, "The library needs a grand entrance that will show those who pass by that this is a place to further your learning and Gustavus is proud of their library because they're proud of its students."

The process yielded some quirky and surprising design suggestions. They asked for dimmer switches in individual study rooms, to allow students to control the amount of light. For the most part, they rejected the notion that group study spaces needed computers, arguing that people would primarily be reading together or quizzing one another in those rooms and students could bring in their laptops if necessary. One student suggested we make a wholesale switch to digital clocks, because the ticking of our clocks drove him crazy.

They were adamantly opposed to carving out space for faculty in the library, asserting that this was first and foremost a student space and that faculty had their own offices and lounges. A public event space in the library was viewed with equal distaste. Students felt this would create too much noise. A few of their ideas were short-lived: chalkboard paint in the "social" areas of the library, sound-absorbing blocks used on the walls of the quiet floor, and pocket/accordion walls to allow students to create study rooms of varying sizes.

The final design included an entrance with marble floors and floor-to-ceiling windows (described by the student designer as "the 1967 Shelby GT in a garage full of cars"); a combined circulation/reserves/interlibrary loan counter, with a separate kidney-shaped reference desk; themed reading rooms (the "warm" room has a fireplace, the "cool" room has an aquarium); a classroom that doubles as a computer lab; and a 24/7 study space that class members argue is too small to handle the demand for this type of space.

Whether or not their ideas made it into the final design, student reactions to the project were overwhelmingly positive. Students expressed a newfound appreciation for teamwork, along with the problem-solving and negotiation skills for compromise. "It is difficult to make all the different parts of the library we are working on flow together. It takes a lot of cooperation and improvising." "We each had our own vision of different parts of the entrance and it took a little give and take." Students also changed their views on the library. "In the future I want the library to be a part of my life because it is a place to gain insight and to relax." "I have gained a new perspective on what the purpose and function of a library is."

The students were self-reported nonlibrary users and certainly not bibliophiles. I initially thought the class was doomed.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

The students brought creativity and imagination to this project; questioned accepted practice and tradition; were able to see the library with fresh eyes; and saw only possibility and potential without being bogged down by budget constraints. Most importantly, they brought life to a vision of a library, *their* library.

Acknowledgements

Note

1. *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 33, no. 1 (2007): 14–26. ✏