

Grinnell College's Burling Library

By HENRY ALDEN

TO WATCH THE GROWTH of the Burling Library from the germ of an idea to the \$1,200,000 edifice of concrete and glass and brick that now stands on the Grinnell campus was an engrossing and thrilling experience for those who shared it, and an account of this growth may prove useful, perhaps even interesting and inspiring, to others who are planning or who dream of planning a new library building.

It is impossible to discover just when the need for a "new" library at Grinnell was first felt—probably the morning after the completion of the "old" Carnegie building in 1905. It can be said with certainty that the feeling found its definitive expression in the 1956 report of the faculty library committee under the chairmanship of Professor Beth W. Noble.

From the beginning of his administration in 1955 President Howard R. Bowen had been sympathetic to the needs of the library, and a new building was given top priority in the building program. Once that decision was reached, the progress of the new library from dream to reality was a rapid one. Early in December 1956 President Bowen appointed a library planning committee to work with the college architects, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. The committee, comprising the librarian and four faculty members, with Professor Curtis B. Bradford as chairman, went to work immediately. Its members read widely in the literature of library planning and building; they sought from the various academic departments statements of specific goals to be reached in the new building; they visited libraries at other colleges and universities; they met, it seemed, almost continuously to express

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and exchange and discuss ideas. The advice of Keyes D. Metcalf, librarian emeritus of Harvard College, who served as consultant, was invaluable.

By the end of the school year in 1957 the programming phase was over. The principles governing the program were expressed thus:

- I. This is a college library, serving a small academic community. Its collections will always be relatively small, which does not mean they cannot be excellent. The building and use patterns forced on universities by the size of their collections and the large number of their readers do not necessarily apply here.
- II. The college library should be thought of as a facility which is part of the academic plant. It should be hospitable to any academic function which can be better carried on in the library than elsewhere on the campus.
- III. In the library will be located all the materials which are of general interest for the college community. It will catalog, protect, and circulate these items.
- IV. The library should be the principal reading and study area on the campus, both for students and faculty. The building should be arranged to facilitate study and reading.
- V. Readers will come to the library at various times for various purposes: to read the paper, to look at a current magazine, to spend

an hour reviewing text books or reserve books, to study for an extended period, and so on. All these purposes should be adequately provided for.

- VI. The primary function of the library staff is service. Its related custodial function is important, but secondary. Its disciplinary function begins and ends with protecting property and preventing conduct which interferes with the complete use of the library facilities.

The principles laid down in this program dictated many specific applications:

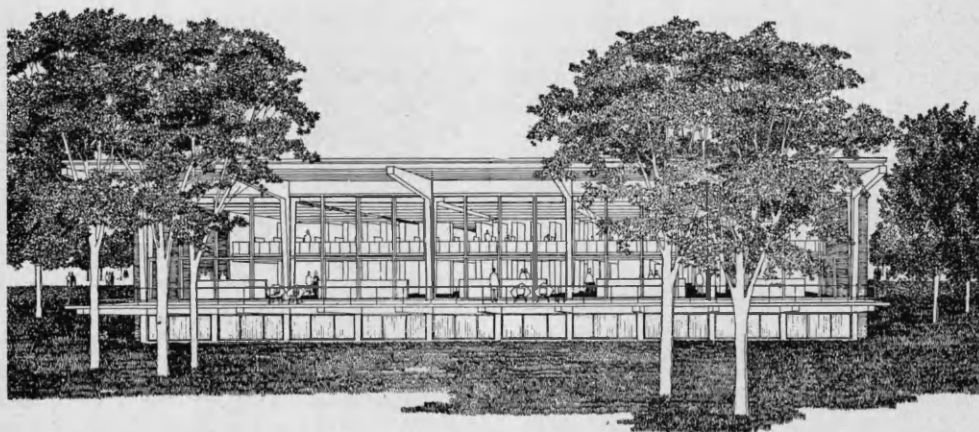
- I. The library should accommodate 550 readers (half of the optimum student body formulated by the administration) and 300,000 books (two and a half times the present collection).
- II. The open stack principle already in practice should be continued but in a physical plant that would really open the stacks and bring the readers in direct contact with the books. (In the old building the stacks were housed in a stack area separated from the reading areas by a door.)
- III. The entire collection should be housed as one unit, and science library—the only departmental library on campus—should be integrated with the main collection to as large an extent as feasible. The once favored plan of divisional reading rooms was soon abandoned by the committee because it would build a possibly temporary faculty structure into the building, because it would require additional staff, and because it would require a costly duplication of basic reference tools.
- IV. A large number of readers should be accommodated at single occupancy units such as carrells.

- V. The library should provide the bare essentials of audio-visual equipment although a faculty poll indicated no widespread interest in such facilities. However, any such extensive future developments as a language laboratory should be housed elsewhere and separately administered.

- VI. No classes should be scheduled to meet regularly in the library, but seminar rooms, also useful for group study and for committee or club meetings, should be provided for special meetings of classes desiring to use library facilities.

Necessity imposed two other requirements on the architects. In order to justify a building large enough to accommodate future growth (which would mean that much of the space would not be immediately needed by the library) the new library building should provide temporary quarters for the administrative offices of the college when the old administration building was razed to permit the construction of the fine arts building on its site. And the cost of the new library building should not exceed \$1,200,000.

By late summer 1957 the designing phase was well under way, and a preliminary design was presented at the Library Buildings Institute at Rutgers University, September 4, 5, and 6, 1957. The decision to build in a contemporary design was probably implicit in the choice of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill as the college architects, but the issue of contemporary versus traditional design was hotly debated at all levels and was finally decided on economic as well as on aesthetic grounds. The library planning committee, however, had early and often reiterated its conviction that in keeping with its position of intellectual and artistic leadership a liberal arts college must promote the best in contemporary design rather than accept the traditional



Dignity, spaciousness characterize library's modern design.

styles of the past. The preliminary design presented at the Rutgers institute was strictly a contemporary design, or possibly a design for the future.

Fundamentally the concept was that of an enormous, high-ceilinged room almost square and with four all glass window-walls. In the center was set a two-level square "island" of stacks and offices. In other words, the square stack area was situated in the center of the building, and the first floor of stacks was covered by a mezzanine supporting another tier of stacks. This stack area was honeycombed with a system of alcoves, and there were no walls or partitions to separate it from the rest of the "enormous room." Around the entire periphery of the main floor, against the window-walls, was a row of individual carrels. Around the entire periphery of the mezzanine against a railing overlooking the four window-walls was another row of individual carrels. The main floor was at campus level, but because of the slope on which the building was situated, beneath the main floor there was an English basement with half windows. This level housed the temporary offices of the college administration as well as the listening, viewing, and seminar rooms. Eventually, as the library collection grew, the administrative offices would be

vacated and the space turned over to further stacks. Most of the persons who saw this preliminary design at the Rutgers institute gave every sign of being impressed by its beauty and functional simplicity, but there were reservations about the practicality of so much glass.

As the architects and the committee explored the project farther, it became clear that the first design presented certain problems. For one thing the building would cost considerably more than the allocated \$1,200,000. The eastern and western glass walls (the side walls of the building, which faces north) presented grave problems of light control and temperature control. With incredible speed a modified design emerged. The east and west window-walls were replaced by solid masonry walls. With the disappearance of these two glass walls, the mezzanine on the east and west overlooked two blank walls—not a particularly attractive prospect, and the architects transformed the island mezzanine into a bridge linking the east and west walls. The chief problem now became that of keeping the concept of the enormous room. More specifically it was a matter of linking the open, high-ceilinged area across the front of the building with that across the back of the building since the two were now completely separated by the bridge mez-

zanine. One means chosen to make these two areas read as parts of a whole was to employ a continuous ceiling pattern of lights. Another was to open as much as possible to two main aisles joining the front and back areas. This was accomplished by increasing the aisle width and by lowering the height of the book shelves framing the alcoves that abutted on these aisles.

The revised design was approved by the trustees before the end of September 1957. In the meantime the fund raising campaign got under way. Its progress kept pace with that of the library building, which made the work of the committee considerably easier. The committee now turned its attention to the interior design and furnishings. In the belief that the building and its contents should form an artistic whole and that they could not properly be planned separately, the interior decoration was placed in the hands of the architects. The committee's consideration of the furnishings was if anything even more time consuming than that of the program and of the design of the building, but most of the decisions concerning the interior appointments had been made when ground was broken for the new building in May 1958.

By December 1958 the building was enclosed. The move from the old library into the new one was made late in the summer of 1959, and Burling Library was in full operation when school opened in the fall—less than three years after the appointment of the library planning committee. The formal dedication took place on October 18, 1959.

Now that the building has been tested by a full year's use the achievement can be measured against the principles set forth in the program. The cost was kept within the proposed \$1,200,000, but only through the generosity of the contractor, Rudolf W. Weitz of Des Moines, an alumnus and member of the board of trustees, who built the building on a

non-profit basis. The interim capacity of the building is 514 readers and 210,000 books. Ultimately, when the administrative offices move out, it will house 550 readers and 350,000 books.

Although it was not stated in the formal program, one major aim had dominated all the deliberations of the committee—that the library building should by its external appearance and its internal appointments express the dignity of humane learning, that it should say when one enters it: "This is a library." The fear was often expressed that the use of contemporary design would result in a building that looked like a factory or like a "cracker box," that it would have none of the dignity and spaciousness of the monumental college libraries of the past. The simple dignity of the facade and the spaciousness of the periodicals and reference areas at the front of the building and the reading area at the back with their high ceiling and vistas uninterrupted by partitions and doors have quieted those fears. The color scheme, while modern and light, has dignity, too. The colors are chiefly white, black, gray, and olive, with an occasional touch of brighter upholstery. Attention is properly focused on the books themselves. They are visible even as one walks up the entrance ramp or as one driving by looks through the rear window-wall, and their bindings are the most colorful element in the decor.

The library operations are carried out conveniently and unobtrusively although some students find the distant sound of telephones and typewriters distracting—proof perhaps of the unusual quietness achieved by the sound-absorbent ceilings and walls and by the sponge-rubber-backed rubber tiles on the floor. Reading clockwise from left to right and beginning in the reference reading area at the left of the entrance, the reference librarian's desk, the cataloger's office, the public catalog, the bibliography alcoves, the periodical indexes consultation cen-

ter, the librarian's office, and the periodicals librarian's desk in the periodicals area to the right of the entrance form a circle around the circulation desk. One of the most debated points in the design was the location of the work room, where cards and pockets are typed and books are lettered and repaired. In order to gain a space with outside windows this room was relegated to the rear of the lower floor near the service entrance, sacrificing a position directly under the circulation desk and nearer to other staff activities. Book trucks and an elevator have minimized the handicap of distance, and the staff enthusiastically maintains that the view from the windows is well worth any inconvenience that it entails.

Since there are no separate rooms on the main floor (with the exception of the librarian's office and the cataloger's office), the entire collection is housed as a unit, and with the approval of the members of the science division, the science library except for a few books and periodicals primarily of use as reference tools, has been integrated with the main collection.

The open stacks are really open, and the adjoining alcoves encourage free use of library materials—too free on occasion, one must admit. Small stools throughout the stack area have made the stack aisles themselves reader areas by allowing a reader to sit down wherever he wishes to browse. When he has made his choice of books and wants to settle down to study, a table and a chair are never very far away. The opportunity of easy access to the books has increased the number of volumes taken from the library without the formality of checking them out, despite the fact that the circulation desk is less than a dozen feet from the front door. (A good many of the books find their way back.) The student government is working on the problem, and there is hope that the situation can be corrected without placing a guard at the exit. Because they really believe

that the service function of the library is more important than its custodial function, most members of the faculty and the administration would be unwilling to turn to a closed stack policy in order to put a stop to the loss of books, but everyone hopes that the students can be educated to exercise a greater responsibility in the use of library materials.

Constant but not heavy use is made of the audio-visual facilities. A language laboratory is in operation elsewhere.

That the library has become the principal reading and study area of the campus is abundantly evident. The library is open longer hours than ever before, and even so the attendance continues to rise. The first year in the new building showed an increase in attendance of more than 135 per cent over the last year in the old building. October 1960 showed an increase of 29 per cent over October 1959. At the planning stage we felt that we were generous in providing seating for half the student body with almost half the seating at single occupancy units, but the many occasions when the library is filled almost to capacity makes us wonder whether our planning showed a lack of imagination. An obvious pattern develops as the library begins to fill up. The single spaces are filled first, then the multiple units are used by a single student. When no other space is available, students join other students at the larger tables. The more individual carrels that a library can provide, the better, would seem to be an axiom in all future library planning. The seminar rooms are very popular for group study, first because they permit discussion among students who are preparing the same material and second because they provide blackboards. We could use more such space if we had it.

It does not require much effort to imagine the library of the future with its doors that never close, an individual desk for every student, and larger rooms ad infinitum for group study.