8th Frankfurt Scientific Symposium: 21st Century Libraries: Changing Forms, Changing Challenges, Changing Objectives

November 3-4, 2008

Opening Remarks by Jeffrey Garrett, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois USA

I'd like to begin with a passage from Voltaire, who in his *Dictionnaire Philosophique* observed that "une grande bibliothèque a cela de bon qu'elle effraye celui qui la regarde." ("A great library has the quality of frightening those who look upon it.")[1] There has always been—and still is today—something inherently terrifying about entering a large library and engaging it for the first time or, for that matter, *any*time. German cultural historian Nikolaus Wegmann, in fact, devotes an entire chapter of his recent book *Bücherlabyrinthe* to the threatening nature of the library: "The Library as Moloch."[2] He marshals Immanuel Kant as his witness in this discussion. In *The Critique of Judgment*, Kant, continuing an aesthetic discourse begun by Plato and Aristotle, explored the delicate balance that exists between our delight in the experience of monumentality and abundance—and our fear of being overwhelmed or crushed, as it were, by the great library, a place that is simply too vast to comprehend.

Comfort, confidence, even delight in the face of the colossal and the motivation to stay and to explore arises only when we can, in some anticipatory way, "grasp" the library, that is, encompass the whole with our minds. If this need of the mind is attended to, Kant writes, then all is well: "The magnitude apprehended may be increased to any extent provided imagination is able to grasp it all in one whole."[3] The effect of monumentality coupled with a unified concept that gradually reveals itself to the viewer through architecture is exhilarating and even cathartic.

The problem confronting library architects, then, is to present the vast mass of library information in a way that makes it mentally and emotionally manageable for individual users. Architects of library space must deal with the danger of monstrousness and the reactions of "fear and loathing" that monstrousness elicits. Library space planners must work to create images in the mind of the beholder that merge to form a context of action in which the user negotiates the space in which he or she finds himself or herself. If this process is successful, then the library user does not experience intimidating walls of books or dizzying arrays of electronic resources but, rather, a glorious "aggregation of ideas," a place of "wonderful treasures"—of which, as we all know, there can never be too many.[4]

What are today's solutions to the problems described by both Voltaire and Kant? That is what we hope to learn from our speakers during the next two days.[5]

---

[1] Voltaire, Dictionnaire philosophique. London [i.e. Geneva], 1764. "Bibliothèque." Online at http://www.voltaire-integral.com/Html/17/bibliotheque.htm. Quoted in Nikolaus Wegmann (2000), p. 122. (See following note.)

[2] Wegmann, Nikolaus. *Bücherlabyrinthe: Suchen und Finden im alexandrinischen Zeitalter*. Cologne: Böhlau, 2000, p. 47ff.

[3] Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*. Translated by James Creed Meredith. Oxford: Clarendon, 1952, p. 100.

[4] Wegmann, op cit., p. 70.

[5] These remarks are adapted from my article "The Legacy of the Baroque in Virtual Representations of Library Space," *The Library Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (2004), p. 42–62.