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The Building of a Library

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by Warren N. Boes

Plans for a new library at Syracuse University began in the 1950s. By the 1960s, reexamination of the project revealed clearly that planning a service to a total academic community requires first of all a study of the community itself. The planners of a library need to know the direction in which the community is going. The seating in the library is based on student enrollment; the collection space to be allowed for future expansion in a library building is based on the expected financial capability of the institution, which in turn is often based on enrollment. The types of service provided by a library reflect the kind of university it serves, i.e., one with a large graduate enrollment, a predominantly undergraduate enrollment, or something in between. These considerations dictate the organization, collections and policies that must be built into planning if the library is to serve the academic community on the highest levels of efficiency and relevance.

As planners, we had to look at the future. Are services going to change? Are people going to stop reading books? What influence will the community have on the library? Unlike a typical academic department of the University, the library serves the community in a broader context; we lend 1000 to 2000 items a month to local industry and professional people. All this had to be considered. Since the University had no plans, it was necessary for the library to make the projections and estimates of where the University was planning to go. As a result, through the comments and criticisms of the university officials, we received the direction we desired.

After a study of student enrollment at the University for the years 1960-1964, projections were made to 1989-90, based on the pattern established. The growth of the library from 1960-1964 also was studied and projected forward. Our projections were based on the assumption that the University would continue to grow and that our collection would increase at the on-going rate. The figures showed that required space for seating students and housing collections by 1989 totaled 1,000,000 gross square feet. This is more square footage of space than existed in all university buildings on the entire campus in 1964. The university officials could not believe our figures and hired the consulting firm of Taylor, Leberfeld and Heldman to make a similar study. After a careful survey of the situation, Taylor, Leberfeld and

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Photo by Jeffrey C. Rother

Heldman, arriving at the figures in a different way from that of the library team, presented the same projections.

Because of the limited financial resources of the University, the question asked was "What can we afford to build?" The final decision was to plan for about 300,000 square feet which, with space we would continue to occupy in other buildings, would provide us with 500,000. This would represent a ten-year rather than a twenty-year projection. In retrospect, I would say that it was a wise decision because the cost of the building, originally estimated at nine million dollars, has increased to thirteen million dollars at the time of actual completion.

One of our major concerns, arising from our experiences in Carnegie Library, was the extent of restraint placed upon us by the fixed nature of the old building, planned at the end of the nineteenth century and built at the beginning of the twentieth. In planning the new library, we wanted to create a building that would be as flexible as possible, so that as concepts of administering a library change in the future, our successors can change the facility to adapt to their methods. We wanted a modular building, a warehouse type of structure so flexible that it could be changed at will.

A second major concern was to provide a building that could be adapted to the new technology and communication systems. We also felt that the use of computers, television and sound will have a great deal of influence on libraries in the years ahead. We knew we must provide for automation and media use in the building. Since technology is changing so rapidly, we knew

that it would not be wise to build around what is visible and obvious today; that would only constrain the building and cause problems.

As a result of these concerns and planning around them, we have some unique features in the new building. One example is the "waffle" design of the ceilings. A styrofoam plug is installed in each of the four sides of each waffle and holes can be drilled through the centers of the waffles. These features allow for the running of wires or troughs in the ceilings in the future, providing for great flexibility of purpose and use. Electric current and therefore communication can be supplied easily to carrels and staff areas on the floors above.

Another requirement for the new building was that it should be designed to cope with future fiscal problems. We knew that the library would face budget cuts and shortage of personnel. We knew we were planning a building three times the size of its predecessor which would therefore require an increased staff, but we were still concerned to make maximum efficient use of that staff. For example, in many libraries that have been planned in recent years the staff offices have been placed at one end of a building that may be two hundred feet long, thus requiring staff and users to walk a maximum of two hundred feet to give and receive service or to shelve a book. This is inefficient planning. We wanted to place our staff in the middle of the floor so that they would be in easy walking distance, no more than one hundred feet, from any point on the floor.

The relation of the size of the building to efficiency also caused some concern and required some decisions. The future growth of the library had been projected to approximately 3,000,000 volumes by 1989. The new building, with about 212,000 net square feet, will hold only half that number. One option which has been chosen by some libraries is to provide a compact storage area for closed shelving within the building. We decided that it would not be to the University's best interest to do this within a very expensive site where service and access were the main objectives. We visualized that with computerization we would be able to determine very quickly which materials users most want and are most likely to use. We could provide very well for the newest and most used materials in the space provided for 1,500,000 volumes. The other and least likely to be used materials could be placed, on a cooperative basis with other institutions, in a warehouse on a country site, where the cost of land and warehousing is much cheaper.

Large university libraries are difficult to use because of their size and the complexity of their catalogs. Many students and faculty members must seek professional help which often is expensive to provide and not available. As a result of difficult access to these libraries, generations are produced who are often incapacitated in the continuing learning process. We wanted to plan a library and provide service within it that would make it unnecessary to be a specialist in order to study and work there.

Planning for ease of access and service in an efficient building required a prognosis of the future of automation and the use of media in the building. Traditionally a library is organized around a catalog; it is the central file and the library cannot operate without it. Both the processing department and the main service points must be near the catalog. However, if it is possible to have access to that file at decentralized points, all services need not be oriented around it. One of the advantages of automation is that centralized access to files can be provided at decentralized points. The new building was planned for decentralization as a means of lessening the difficulties due to size and complexity. Decentralized access means that staffs can be split up by subject and, with automation performing the routine tasks now absorbing up to 60 percent of the staff in a typical university library, can be deployed so that more staff members are out on the subject floors.

To provide easy access through decentralized points and redeployment of staff so that more of them will face the public, the new library is divided according to subject matter. Separate floors are allocated to the fine arts, the humanities, the social sciences, and one to area studies, history, geography and anthropology. Staff on each floor can personalize service and be of greater help to those who need or request it. All of these plans center around a teaching concept — that as the library becomes simpler to use, people will use it to the betterment of their education and research. This has been our dream in planning the new library.

The new building also has a large media capability. On the second floor every carrel is wired. There is a troughway underneath the floor so that, if and when desired, a dial access system or any sound or visual system of the future can be installed. There is a large room with a computer-type floor that can be adapted to any change that develops, with special ventilating systems to control the heat that computers, tape machines, broadcasting units and other modern technological instruments generate.

The library is a communication instrument. It is the major source of information and
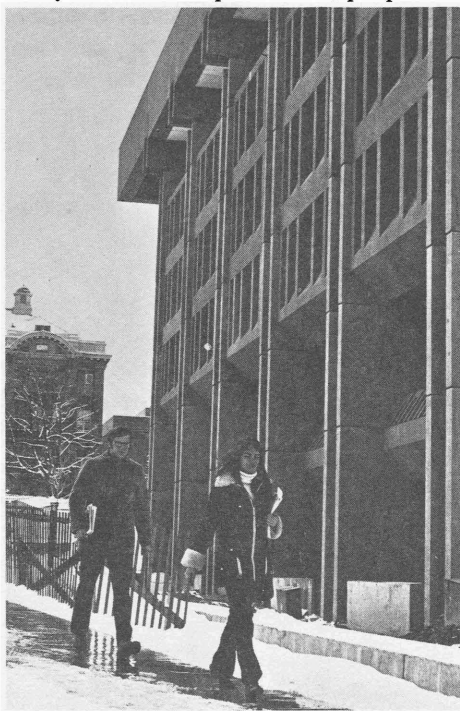

Photo by Jeffrey C. Rother

provides access to existing knowledge both locally and elsewhere; it should be able to deliver such information and knowledge to the person who needs it. This process of communication, of delivery of information both on the campus and for the community, is extremely important and the new library is prepared to further it. Communication modes and provision for their use in the future are evident in every portion of the new building.

Security and available budget have an unavoidable impact on flexibility and access. The necessity of understanding this relationship and accepting the realities behind it has resulted in further interesting features of the new building. There have been demands on campus that the library be kept open twenty-four hours a day, and the demands have been met during some examination periods. The movement seems to be inactive at present but may recur in either the near or distant future. It is very expensive to keep an entire building open at all times, especially where there is free access to all shelving and the resultant need to keep all floors fully staffed. The first three floors of the new library are accessible by an open staircase; the only access to the top floors is by elevator, the staircases at the four corners of the building being emergency staircases only. The first three floors serve all the needs of the students for current periodicals, bound general periodicals, microforms, reference material and reserved books, and all the access to wired carrels where most of the programmed learning will take place. This means that the top four floors can be shut off very securely while the lower floors can be adequately staffed to provide the general services to the students, the faculty and anybody else who wants to work until three or four o'clock in the morning, with a significant saving of funds in comparison to what it would cost to operate the entire building.

Some university libraries operate in a much more traditional way with closed stacks. If the time should come when a future library administration should wish to close the stacks in the new building, access to the top floors can be limited as desired. All systems are possible: open access to all students and faculty at all times, closed access, or partial access. In this way we face reality while still anticipating possible changes in the future.

For many years students, faculty and librarians have worked in the dull and dilapidated surroundings of Carnegie Library. We wanted the new building to be warm and inviting so that those entering it will feel welcome and comfortable. The color schemes for the interior are all from the warm side of the spectrum. The furniture is mainly wood, with a warmth not present in metal. Carpets, again in warm colors, cover the floors in all student seating areas.

These were the important plans and the significant concepts behind them as we projected the new building. How well the architects and interior decorators carried out our ideas is evident in the new Ernest S. Bird Library, where we have the means needed to operate an efficient teaching system, with communications capability, flexibility, and effective arrangements for

deployment of staff, all among bright, pleasant, comfortable physical surroundings. This is what we want students to find when they come to the Bird Library, both now and in years to come. I believe we have planned fully toward accomplishing our aim.