New Learning, New Scholarship, New Spaces: Creating Dynamic Physical Environments

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Lecture halls, teaching laboratories, and quiet study nooks are still needed, but no longer fulfill the full range of students' needs for learning spaces. As students choose to learn in dynamic environments, they need spaces that stimulate intellectual curiosity and foster critical inquiry. By implementing a full spectrum of learning spaces, the University of Michigan Library reinforces the message that we are the place on campus where emerging information technologies, rich information resources, and user-focused services come together to support learning and scholarship.

Six Weeks to Jumpstart Our Thinking

How do we design learning spaces and align services to meet the need of current and future library users? This was the underlying question for the University of Michigan Library when the Library administration charged an internal task force to test old assumptions and pursue new thinking about the relationship between programmatic services and physical spaces that foster collaboration and an enriched academic experience for our users. The task force focused on the Shapiro Library- home to the Undergraduate Library, Media Library, and Science Library-with the expectation that solutions identified in this process might extend across the entire Library system. The official charge of this task force was to recommend changes, both to physical space and programmatic services, that could transform the Shapiro Library into a contemporary learning laboratory.

The task force was deliberately given a short time period of six weeks – enough time to develop new ideas but not enough time to worry about which ideas might require extraordinary resources, or be overly challenging to implement. The task force quickly got to work. They reviewed information from multiple sources, both existing material and new input solicited for this purpose; conducted a variety of site visits and interviews; evaluated the input and drew on the diverse experiences of task force members to formulate recommendations. The result of this effort was an internal white paper that brought together key ideas.

Below are examples from the white paper that highlight proposed service and facility improvements that directly support student learning:

- Expanding existing research consultation services

- Supporting authoring in a rich media environment

- Building on the virtual reference program to include emerging collaborative technologies – blogs, instant messaging, and wikis

- Expanding the existing Library's Knowledge Navigation Center www.lib.umich.edu/knc/

- Assigning librarian liaisons to living learning communities

- Providing a flexible and neutral learning environment for students to work both independently and collaboratively

  - communication and technology enhancements

  - configurable and collaborative work spaces

  - proximity to expertise

  - areas for individual and group work that support the pedagogical shift to collaborative and interactive learning

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- a place that creates opportunities for the intersections that do not happen when studentsonly interact with their peers in the same class, the same major, the same school or college

- space that acknowledges that the academic and social lives of today's undergraduate students are intertwined (café, informal places to gather, etc)

- contemporary spaces for consultation and help services, project/media creation services, instruction services, and curriculum supports services

These changes recognize the importance of being not only tuned in to, but also an integral part of the academic community. Rather than being defined solely by a collection, the Shapiro Library will provide an infrastructure to reflect the way undergraduates think, collaborate, research, and learn. By moving deliberately and thoughtfully forward, acknowledging challenges, and taking advantage of existing strengths, we will be able to provide more than just access to information, rather a seamless integration of information retrieval technology and human expertise.

This white paper did jumpstart our thinking and prompted us to retain an architectural firm to work with us develop a plan for the Shapiro Library. The architectural firm worked with us to achieve the following:

- Understand our facility and programmatic goals

- Review existing constraints, including capacity and condition of existing infrastructure

- Prepare a benchmark review of comparable institutions

- Develop short-term and long-term strategies, including design concepts, cost estimates, and schedules for facility upgrades to address our key goals

PLAN IN HAND, CAFÉ GRAND OPENING

Imagine a café at the Shapiro Library and what do you see?

- Two people sitting at a small table in intense conversation

- A student curled up in a comfortable armchair with a book and cup of coffee in hand

- Students working on a group project

- A faculty member meeting with a student to talk over his honors thesis progress

- Researchers accessing library resources via wireless access

These scenes depict social learning in action, which is the foundation for the Library's vision for Bert's Café.

The grand opening of Bert's Café, made possible by a generous gift from alumnus Bertram Askwith, in February 2008 was the first of many facility enhancements specifically geared toward enriching the student experience. We are in the midst of planning other upgrades for the fall including a new reference desk, more configurable and collaborative work spaces, and the implementation of a new browsing collection specifically developed for undergraduate students.

THE LEGACY OF SPACE

We have transferred lessons learned through this process to other facilities. One such effort relates to Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library. In many ways, the Graduate Library offers everything you could possibly want in an academic library:

- an historic, even iconic, 1920 Albert Kahn building

- an original location, with broad stone steps and imposing façade, situated geographically at the literal heart of the campus on the "Diag"

- a soaring reading room with stained glass, arched ceiling, red oak shelving, architecturally designed around dramatic oil paintings originally displayed at the 1892-93 World's Fair in Chicago

- a 1970's era south tower with individual carrels and predictable rectangular stacks layout making materials easy to find

- a strong identity, high use by faculty and graduate and undergraduate students, all contributing to a sustained building culture both vibrant and intellectual.

The Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library also presents every problem you could possibly imagine in an academic library:

- an old, deteriorating building with outdated plumbing, HVAC, and wiring

- an original location with the 1920 building erected around the 1800's original load-bearing steel stacks, integral to the actual structure of the current building

- a jumble of spaces created, removed, remodeled, repurposed over so many decades that any sense of original character, natural functionality, or harmony of space has long since been lost

- old north building stacks so labyrinthine and confusing that basement levels border on the sinister

- a regular award winner in the annual campus poll by the student newspaper where the annual win in the category "best place to study" is routinely overshadowed by the win for "best place to have sex."

The challenge in such space is to breathe life into an extraordinary building, long woven into the fabric of campus life and learning. But with a multi-million price tag for a major renovation, how can you do this without a capital building fund or donor capable of giving at this level? How to even begin thinking about it? Absent an overall vision of how space inevitably is called upon to serve the future, we naturally focus on the functionality in the present. Absent the resources to redesign the whole, we remodel by room, by floor, or by unit to create today's better space destined to become tomorrow's collective jumble. Several recent projects illustrate both the challenge and potential to redesign in the context of a larger vision, but within the practical reality of priorities and limited resources.

The Aesthetic Imperative: Making Beautiful Space Beautiful Again

The reading room murals were originally painted for display at the Chicago World's Fair in 1892-93 and later given to Michigan. In 1918, when plans for a new library building were underway, it was decided that the murals would hang in the main reading/reference room and it was specially designed to accommodate the murals. This is still considered one of the most beautiful rooms on the Michigan campus. Over the years, the installation of shabby "institutional" issue carpeting, strange lighting fixtures (think interstate highway turnoff) with concrete bases, and metal shelving as the reference collection grew and use declined, had marred the original beauty of the space. The reference desk had been moved out of this room into a more central second floor location many years before. Detailing the ceiling, purchasing new furniture and lighting, and restoration of the murals were not undertaken, as all had a multi-million dollar price tag. And yet, this room somehow sustained its own culture of elegance, dignity, quiet, reflection, and learning. It is a space where even undergraduates appear to love to come and do their chemistry homework and read. The room will quickly converge (and not pleasantly) upon the unwary cell-phone user, and castigate the overly loud reference librarian who enters to help a patron.

A local architecture firm who agreed to come and look at the space suggested removing the concrete "pier" lighting, and having a custom carpet design done. Working with a palette of colors from the murals (green/red/gold), the architect, in collaboration with the carpeting manufacturer, developed several patterns. Of those, we picked two to have samples executed and settled on the final result: a pattern unique to the room that turned the carpeting into an architectural feature of the room. The reference collection was weeded down, eliminating the need for the added metal shelving, and a book in/book out "policy" (more of a guideline really!) limits the collection's expansion. This allows us to maintain a working reference collection, while

the sheer collection presence in this space sustains a culture of the book. The addition of a few upholstered armchairs invited users to linger and read. The carpeting project turned out to be a "transformative" change that re-contextualized in historic space the perceptions and values of learning, knowledge, and tradition. "Even if you aren't in the mood to study, you feel an aura of intelligence around you that pushes you to 'hit the books'" (Kracker and Pollio, 2003, p.1109).

Digital Library Has a Desk with a Heartbeat

Since the mid-1990's when the main card catalog was removed from the center of the second floor, this space went from the "card catalog room" to "2 Center." Like most libraries pressed for new service and technology space, the new space "jumble" co-located important functions (reference desk, Knowledge Navigation Center, Faculty Exploratory, public workstations) but obscured the natural geography of the space. While 2 Center was the physical center between the old North and newer South Building -- a natural high-traffic service center -- there was no flow across the space to communicate the natural relation of one function to another as a service epicenter. We had created, not intentionally but serendipitously, a "learning commons," but failed to capitalize on the space's potential to convey this. The magic breakthrough in reconceptualizing this space came when an architect suggested, almost casually: "Have you ever considered taking these doors and doorways out and relocating your reference desk right in the middle?" Instantly, it became apparent how we could make a contiguous space sweeping from North to South Building, with a newly conceived reference desk at the true geographic and service heart of the Library. It is now possible to feel the outside space inside as 2 Center sits at the geographic heart of the campus. The space is dead on center with a straight line across the campus Diag, across the green and long plazas to the Graduate School bordering the north side of central campus.

Library needs will change, and our beautiful desk was ordered from a stock line (5 woods, any laminate top you want!) for that reason. No custom design, no granite countertop or six-month wrangling over design (one semi circle is "high" and the other is "low"). It was installed in a day, and can be removed in half the time. It is functional, flexible, and most of all, expendable. Opening up the space itself will never be the wrong thing -- it is a canvas that will serve again and again. Early in this project, we discovered that the original 1920's building had actually had the paging desk located in this very spot. Was this a coincidence or more?! The desk supplier was so taken with the historic photos of the original desk, they actually added some wood detailing on the curved surface to replicate the original at no extra charge. The jewel-toned paint color palette for the walls in the new space so highlighted existing replicas of the Parthenon Frieze that patrons asked "when did you get those beautiful friezes?" and architecture classes visit regularly to observe the effect of color in space. All things old have turned out to be new again. And now the co-location of the reference desk, the Faculty Exploratory (where staff can enhance lecturing, researching, and publishing skills),

the Knowledge Navigation Center (where staff and students can get assistance with software, digital imaging, and other technology tools), and symmetrically distributed public workstations create an uncommon learning commons, where space provides visible form and tangible function for subject expertise, technology application, information, and help.

FROM ROOM 100 TO LIBRARY GALLERY

The historic shift in processes, functions, and space needs for technical services allowed the Library to relocate cataloging operations from their original 9000 square foot location on the first floor of Hatcher to a less "main street" location in the Library. This newly created Library gallery, located at the heart of the central campus in the Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library, provides an exciting venue for displaying Library special collections and rich treasures, hosting lectures, presentations and traveling exhibits, and collaborating with campus and community partners. We had the chance to create public space as three-ring circus by design in this physical location that is the UM equivalent of beach-front property. The essential value is in the location, fortunately, since the renovation was minimalist to say the least: Plant-issue carpeting (so scorned for our reading room), repainted walls, and a portable wall system called Mila Wall that gave us instant display capability. The beauty of this wall system ordered from a web site is that it can be painted, nailed upon, screwed into, patched and repatched, configured magically into numerous configurations, and stored compactly when not in use. The walls go up in about two hours and come down in one.

Exhibits to date have ranged from a major exhibit on legendary coach Bo Schembechler (that included huge fabric panels with images and quotes) to a traveling exhibit from New York Public Library: "Letters to Sala - A Young Women's Life in Nazi Labor Camps." The classroom space of portable wi-fi computers and presentation technology was enclosed with a glass-in-frame wall system. Stackable chairs create seating for large audiences or for intimate readings. Old built-in oak bookshelves were filled with withdrawn books from the collection giving the whole space the historical character and ambience of knowledge "culture." We have held numerous classes, presentations, and events in the space; each has brought new communities in to the Library. Now we are moving from the entrepreneurial phase to professional management by hiring an exhibits/outreach librarian to develop an innovative exhibit and events program designed to enrich the intellectual, educational and cultural life of the Michigan campus and wider community.

ARCHITECTS, DESIGNERS, PURCHASING AND PLANT... OH MY!

As libraries around the country undergoing similar initiatives to transform their spaces, we offer the following concepts for consideration:

- Partnerships. Large and complex projects will involve architects, designs, and university purchasing

& plant departments. Each of these participants will require funding and your active participation to ensure the renovation vision remains true.

- Scalability. Consider executing smaller projects or small pieces of a larger vision. A quick and modest cost consultation with an interior designer about paint color or carpet choice can make an enormous difference in the final aesthetic affect.

- Creativity. If faced with an exorbitant estimate for enclosing a small space with drywall, don't hesitate to see if you can accomplish the same space goal with a purchased and installed wall system.

- Inquiry. By asking questions, you will better understand what costs and what does not. Help may be a phone call away.

- Courage. Recognize that no carpet or paint will ever please everyone.

- Flexibility. What if you could only do a portion of a renovation?

- Ingenuity. Use what you know to create the space you need and use what you have to create the space you need.

CREATING LEARNING SPACES AND LEARNING TO CREATE SPACES

The types of renovations described above have enabled us to highlight our libraries as the place on campus where emerging information technologies, rich information resources, and a user-focused suite of services come together to support a culture of learning and scholarship. By creating new learning spaces, we are learning to build on the existing strong relationships between students, scholars, and the Library; to leverage the best features of our facilities within finite resources; to enhance our services and facilities; and to make the most of emerging opportunities created by rapid technology innovations.

REFERENCES

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