

# OLAQ

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Volume 22 , Number 1 *Access Services in the New Century* | Pages 9 - 14

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7-15-2016

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How, L., & Bystrom, S. (2016). Architecture and Access: Navigating A New Space. *OLA Quarterly*, 22(1), 9-14. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1845>

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*OLA Quarterly* is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374 | <http://commons.pacificu.edu/olaq>

# Architecture and Access: Navigating A New Space

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## Introduction

Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA) is a small, private art and design college founded in 1909. PNCA is located in downtown Portland and hosts approximately 600 students in ten undergraduate programs and five graduate programs. In January 2015, the campus was moved from our old building — a converted warehouse — to the Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Center for Art and Design, a former federal building located on Portland's North Park Blocks in the heart of the city.

This move almost doubled the square footage of the library, affording us more space for our collection, three new study rooms, a reference desk, a built-in IT help desk, and more seating and workspace for our patrons. Like any new space, however, the Albert Solheim Library required many adjustments, both in our approach to access services and in the usage and layout of the space itself.





Photos by Annie Oldenburg

Old Library



Old Library

### **The Old Building**

From 1998 to 2015, PNCA's main building, like many others in Portland's formerly industrial Pearl District, was a converted warehouse. The Charles Voorhies Fine Art Library, born in 2001, was approximately 5,500 square feet, situated under the eaves on the second level. It had a designated computer lab, low ceilings, stained carpet, no natural light, and was prone to stifling temperatures in Portland's warmer months. It was, by 2015, much too small for the needs of a growing student body and collection. Many days, during the lunch hour, every seat would be taken (as well as some additional students sitting on the floor)!

### **The Move**

After months of preparation, the actual move happened very quickly, during the winter break between Fall 2014 and Spring 2015 semesters. Along with a stellar team of student workers, we packed and labeled everything. Movers loaded our books onto rolling shelves, which were then stored in another space in





Photo by Annie Olenburg

Old Library

the building while our shelving was dismantled and moved to the new building, along with furniture, computers, and boxes full of supplies.

Ongoing construction delayed our actual presence in the new library space by several weeks, forcing us to work out of a slapdash circulation office on the sixth floor of the building. Initially, our collection was still in the old building, necessitating multiple trips per day to locate and pull materials requested by students and faculty, and bring them to the new building. Then, our collection gradually migrated from the old building to the new, stored on plastic-wrapped wooden carts in a first floor area while the floors were finished and shelves built in the actual library space. Once we got into the library space proper, our collection was still only accessible by staff wearing hard hats, which did not allow for patron browsing; only retrieval of specific materials. Despite these challenges, students continued to check out materials, and faculty arranged their reserves materials on our metal book carts, though usage was generally sparse.

### **The New Building**

The Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Center for Art and Design is in the city's original post office, built in 1918. After an extensive capital campaign, renovation began in 2014 and thoroughly modernized the space, with smart classrooms, a "mediathèque" for lectures, performances, and events, light-filled studios, and state-of-the-art labs for printmaking and media arts, among other uses. The newly monikered Albert Solheim Library is 9,365 square feet, spread over the first floor and a mezzanine level. We now have a library space that accommodates our collection — which left our old space bursting at the seams — and provides our community with plenty of comfortable, well-equipped rooms to pursue their research, work, and leisure.





Photo by Mario Gullucci

New Library

Our new, drastically different space prompted several changes in student usage and behavior in the library. The old library was a bustling social place, which was too small for quiet study to also take place. Its few, small carrels stood underneath the lowest part of the roof: not the most conducive environment for staying alert and focusing on one's studies. In the new library, we have observed that usage has been less social and more academic: the library is now a place where students know they can spread out, work diligently on computers as well as fine art assignments, and find a quiet corner full of natural light to read or nap. This is possibly due to the fact that there are more spaces other than the library in this building for students to use socially, or could be related to the perception of the library in its new space as a true academic library. Furthermore, our open floor plan means that sound carries quite easily in the library; a fact of which the students seem to be aware, and consequently lower their volume out of respect for their peers. We are often surprised to walk through the quiet library and find it packed with students!

Social activities still take place in the library but are now limited primarily to our study rooms. For example, a video game club meets once a week to plug their console into a TV monitor in one of the study rooms and play games together. Because we see the library as both an academic and a social site, we hope to work with the student body to present more programming in the future that would further activate the space and collection, and promote the lively exchange of thoughts and ideas through readings and other events.





Photo by Lindsey Rickert

New Library

### **The Albert Solheim Library**

Library staff were on the planning task force and met with architects and contractors over several months as plans were being drawn up for the retrofitting and construction of the school's various spaces. These plans went through multiple iterations as adjustments and compromises were made in order to balance the institution's needs with its budget. A mezzanine level was added between the first and second floors once it became clear that the first floor's soaring ceilings could accommodate the addition of another, much-needed floor. The library, originally slated to occupy the first and second floors in the northwest corner of the building, now occupies the first floor and mezzanine in the same space. We had to adjust our layout plan quickly due to the mezzanine's low ceilings, which could not safely accommodate shelving of regular height: a loss of hundreds of linear feet of shelving space.

With our expanded space came a need to properly staff it. In our former library, it was sufficient to have one staff or work-study person on duty during our quieter hours: early morning and late evening. We were able to stay open until midnight four days a week. Our larger space necessitates that two people be present during open hours, and as a result we have had to shorten our hours on weeknights. We hope to soon be able to hire another permanent staff member and return to our former schedule.

Because the new library is such a beautiful space, students have been inspired to create site-specific installation art. For us, this is an encouraging sign that students are feeling a greater sense of ownership in the library, and we love to see how students engage the space. We are in the process of writing new policies for exhibiting art in the library, which will encourage students to express themselves artistically without hindering others' access to the space.



## The Future

Over the past three semesters, we have gradually settled into our space, made some adjustments — both physical and policy-based — and are carefully taking note of where we could make more. There were a few changes to the completed library space that obviously needed to be made as soon as possible. For example, when the shelving was fully installed on the mezzanine with the endcaps added, some sections fell out of compliance with ADA standards. We had to take some shelving out and shuffle it around to make the space accessible. When we moved into the space, there was a beautiful, built-in wooden desk that wrapped around the railing of the mezzanine, but only the center portion had outlets installed. The sides were undesirable places to work since there were no accessible outlets, so we had one side section removed in order to add more comfortable seating: a nook with a small couch and two chairs. Now almost every time we walk by, at least one student is relaxing in this area. This summer, we have been reconfiguring our zine and periodical shelving, to allow for greater visibility between the circulation desk and the rest of the first floor. By increasing the desk's visibility, we hope patrons will feel more comfortable approaching us there for help.

In response to the needs of our relatively new and growing graduate student body, who undertake research at a deeper level than the undergraduates, we have increased our maximum renewal threshold from three to five check-out periods. The extra time allows these students, whose studios are located in a different building, to engage more deeply with material they have checked out. We are requesting many more books through interlibrary loan, especially for the students in the MA in Critical Theory and Creative Research program. Our Low-Residency MFA in Visual Studies students are peppered all over the United States and require longer checkout periods for items that are mailed to them.

Our approach to — and vision of — access services has changed in both expected and unforeseen ways with the move into our new building, and will continue to evolve in response to changing student, faculty, and community needs. We have seen an increase in public visitation and continue to learn to balance our students' needs with those of our guests. An ongoing, longitudinal space usage study will allow us to rethink and reconfigure the space as needed, and our upcoming biennial student satisfaction survey should provide us with some valuable feedback we can act upon. After three semesters in the new building, it finally “feels like home,” to the library staff as well as the student body. We anticipate that our community's needs — and our methods of meeting them — will continue to change as we settle in further.

Lastly, we'd like to extend an invitation to you to come and visit us! We would love to show you around and answer any questions you have. Please stop by, browse our shelves, and curl up with a book or two. 

